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STORIES OF IMAGINATION

ANUARY

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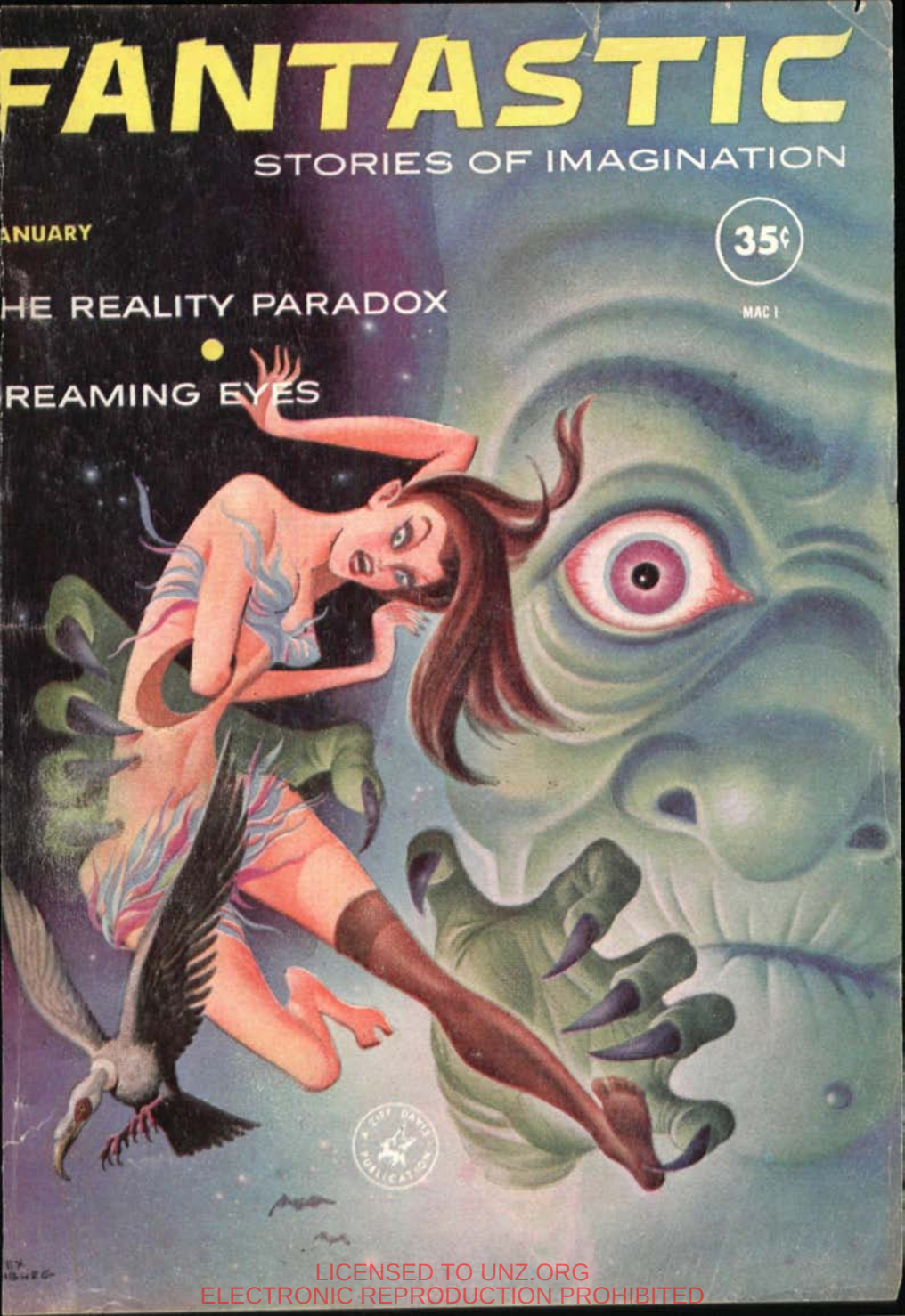
HE REALITY PARADOX

REAMING EYES



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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

JANUARY 1961
Volume 10 Number 1

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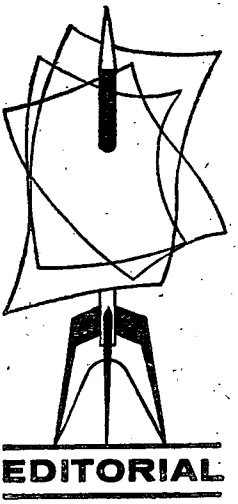
Keep Out—Private Solar System



IF you would like to know why it gets progressively harder to find fantasy stories, all you need do is read your daily paper. The writing boys just can't keep ahead of the science boys. And I am not talking now about rocketry or medicine or even psionics. I am talking about real gone, far out fantasy of the "Bang, and another galaxy bit the dust!" type.

To wit: A highly respectable physicist, Dr. Freeman J. Dyson of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, has reported that intelligent beings may have built gigantic planetary shields to conceal themselves in space. He recommended that what astronomers call dark stars may be heavenly bodies deliberately obscured by huge shells built of planetary substances by advanced civilizations.

Dyson theorized that such a shield would be the equivalent, construction-wise, of breaking up Jupiter and rearranging it in a shell around the sun in an orbit twice the distance of the earth from the sun. This shell, he said, "could be made quite comfortably habitable, and could contain all the machinery required for exploiting the solar radiation falling onto it from the inside" (presumably as an energy source).

Dr. Dyson indicated that while such a shell-building assignment would take "considerable time," it may not be as "far-fetched as it may sound." Any intelligent species, he reported, within a few thousand years after it reaches an industrial stage, should be able to do this—to "live in an artificial biosphere which completely surrounds the parent star."

The dark stars have long been a source of puzzlement to astronomers. Accepted theory holds they are either obscured by immense dust clouds, or that they are just too dim to be seen. Now we have the suggestion that they are dark on purpose—someone has pulled down the shade to keep Peeping Earthlings from seeing what goes on.

No Trespassing—Intelligent Beings At Work—Keep Off the Galactic Grass—This Solar System Posted—Keep Out, This Means You —Delivery Entrance 10 Parsecs To The Right.

(continued on page 67)

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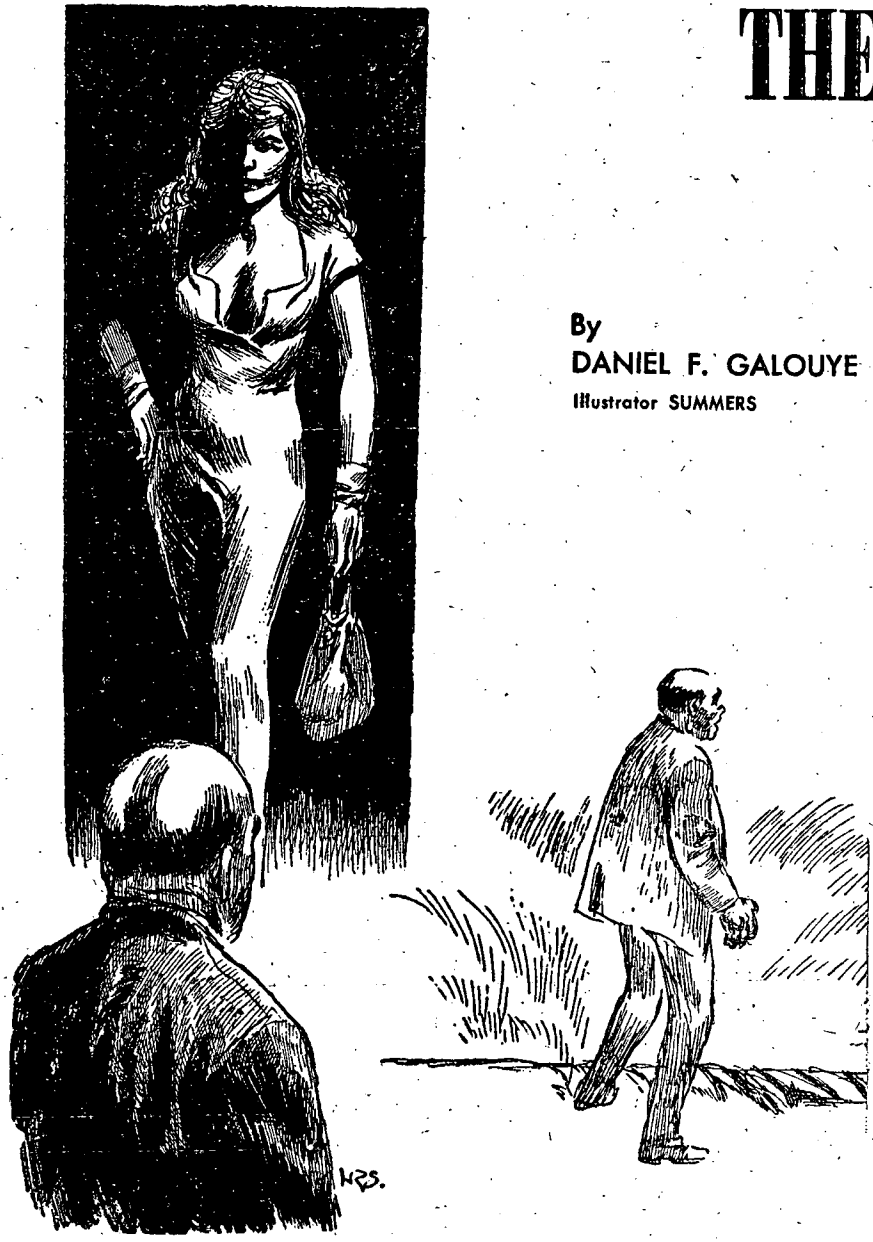
THE

By
DANIEL F. GALOUYE
Illustrator SUMMERS



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REALITY PARADOX

If reality is subjective—a mere creation of the mind—then each man can, in theory, be his own God. It took Hector Wilkins quite a horrible while to figure that out. And by the time he did it was too late to turn back.

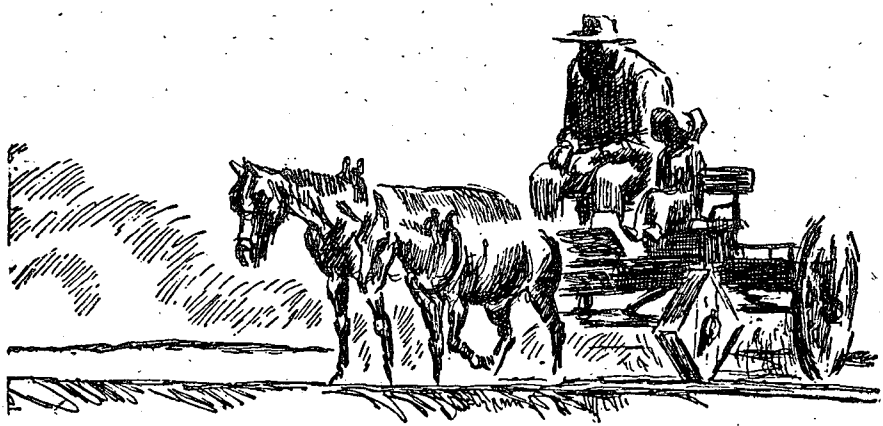
IF Hector Wilkins had known he was going to kill his wife, he would undoubtedly have selected an argument more worthy of so momentous a development.

He had no way of perceiving, though, that the climactic hour had arrived. So the quarrel was as insignificant as they had all been over the past twenty years of marital stagnation.

"You *know* I always need the car on Saturday afternoons, Ruth!"

"But, dear, you said it would be all right if I joined the Caladium Club."

Almost lost in the upholstered



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depths of the chair, she was a slight woman with colorless hair made interesting only by incipient streaks of gray.

"Saturday's my golfing day!" He drove a fist into his palm. "I *always* need the car then!"

He swore and paced, his hands clenched behind him. He was not so tall, but stockily built. His hair, thinning above the forehead, had maintained its color, though, and his bearing evidenced a drive and self-assertion that had long fled his wife.

"If you want, I'll quit the club," she murmured, not glancing up from her needlework.

It was that more than anything else that drove him to frustration—her calmness, the implied attitude that she was merely tolerating him.

"No, no!" he shouted. "You *need* something—normal in your life."

"Yes, dear."

"You *should* get out more, mix with people."

"Yes, dear."

Twenty years of "yes, dear" and "no, dear." Twenty years wasted, down the drain!

Somewhere in the distance a church bell tolled its summons to Sunday morning worship, disturbing the heavy suburban silence.

He stared down at her, resentment over lost ambition simmering in him like a festering hatred.

"Yes, dear," she uttered absently, despite the fact he had said nothing.

Enraged, he seized her shoulders and hauled her to her feet. "If I hear one more of those damned—"

Reeling off balance, she groped for support. Her hand came up to clutch his sleeve—and left the needle embedded half an inch in his forearm.

Hector's reaction was spontaneous. His wife had *stabbed* him!

"You damned little tramp!" he roared, plucking the needle from his flesh.

Then he seized her shoulders again and hurled her back into the chair—but with more force than he had intended. Rearing up on its hind legs, the chair remained for a frozen moment—long enough for Ruth to gasp and grip its arms—then toppled over backwards.

There was a frantic rapping at the door.

But he only stood there, fascinated with the curious inclination of his wife's neck. Her head had obviously struck the stone edge of the artificial hearth with considerable force. And now her eyes were staring lifelessly through the picture window.

Hector Wilkins stumbled along a dark sidewalk. Ahead, a single street lamp cast its sallow rays

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down to form a puddle of light on the harsh asphalt. Beyond was—nothing. No buildings, no other light, not even an extension of the street. It was as though all creation ended at the far perimeter of the light.

Dumfounded, he looked ahead at the two urchins who were shooting craps on the curbstone.

"Damned but I'm hot!" exclaimed one, rolling a three and a four.

Hector drew up before them and stared in bewilderment at the black void of infinite nothingness beyond the realm of the street lamp.

"Hot enough for you, Hector?" the other urchin grinned up at him.

It *was* a sweltering night, Hector conceded, aware of the perspiration that had dampened his face.

Then he tensed. "You know my name?"

The boy with the dice spat. "Hell, why shouldn't we, bub? You made us, didn't you?"

"I—I don't understand."

The other kid seized the dice. "Think of a number, Hector."

Dazed, Hector thought of the number six.

The boy rolled a four and a two.

"See?" he asked, shrugging. "You're the Big Cheese. Whatever you say goes. Try again, bub."

Hector thought of the number fifteen.

The youth tossed the cubes and one die came to rest with its upper face displaying eight crowded dots. The other showed seven markings.

"Say! That's neat!" The nearer boy slapped his companion on the back.

"Wheel's got a sense of humor."

"He's the most. Hey, Hector, how about dreaming us up a hot little broad? Soft, blond and ready to go for some fast talk."

"Come on, Hector. Make with the hocus-pocus."

The street scene reeled and Hector reeled with it. "What do you mean—I made you?"

"You poor, dumb square," the farther youth sympathized. "You mean you really don't dig the setup?"

Just then the hot little broad put in her appearance. Blond and soft, she came hip-swinging into the realm of the street lamp. In the distance a squealing clarinet and a tinny trumpet gave out with an appropriate sizzling beat.

The closer boy tossed the cubes over his shoulder. "That's more like it, bub—just what I wanted."

"How's about pulling another out of the same hat for me?" the second begged.

Sultry Blonde, however, came directly to Hector, running her

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hands down the contours of her hips. She drew up before him and sensuously traced the outlines of his lapels with her fingertips.

"Aw, come on, Wheel!" the first kid protested. "Don't make it come out like this!"

The other chimed in. "Don't chicken out—"

Then both the boys were gone —completely. And when Hector looked back at the girl's impatient face he saw she was only a child. In the second it took him to glance away in disappointment and stare back again, however, she acquired a full and ripe maturity.

The stifling humidity of the night pressed in on him. One of the buildings across the street burst into flames as Sultry Blonde pressed her warm body against his.

"What's it going to be, Top Stuff?" she whispered. "What do you make me do now—live it up? Or just stand around for decoration?"

He drew back. "What do I make you do?"

"Sure." She hunched her bare shoulders. "You crack the whip. You call the tricks. It's your show."

VOICE: SHE MEANS, HECTOR, YOU'RE THE CHIEF DETERMINER, THE PRIME MOVER.

The words blared at him with cyclonic fury. Cringing, he searched the darkness all about him. The Voice must have come from the boundless ebon reaches —from beyond the meager reality limned by the pale street light.

YOU'RE TRAPPED, HECTOR. ENSNARED IN YOUR OWN AUTONOMOUS REALITY.

Retreating from the Voice, he felt the solid asphalt of the street crumble beneath his feet. Then he was tumbling nauseously through the void.

It was a shimmering day, warmed to delight by a pleasant sun and tempered by cool breezes that ruffled the greenery of the park. Scores of children romped in boisterous play all around him.

Hector Wilkins blinked at the abundance of light that poured down from the cloudless sky. Then he bent an ear uncertainly toward the bandstand. Gaudily attired musicians with squat, visored caps puffed away at their brass instruments. Surprisingly, they produced the buoyant strains of a Strauss waltz.

Dazed, he stumbled forward. And one of the children—a plump blond girl with springy curls and wearing frilled pantalets—came racing forward. She hurled herself at him with zestful abandon.

He braced for the impact. But she landed in his arms with the lightness of a balloon. Astonished

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at the illusion of complete weightlessness, he set the child down, afraid she would drift away.

The undeniable reality of his experiences stung him and, drawing up among the anciently attired men and women attending the concert, he tried to fathom the cause behind the incomprehensible upheavals of reality.

"Nice day," said a young woman on his right.

"Yes, very nice," agreed her escort, somewhat uncomfortable in his stiff, celluloid collar. "And I don't think we'll have any rain either."

"What a pity," the girl lamented. "It would bring out the lawns so nicely."

"Yes, it would—wouldn't it?"

The band sailed militantly into "The Charge of the Light Brigade." But the conductor brought his arms down sharply, summoning silence. He tapped his baton and launched the band into "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow!"

Everybody was standing now, circling Hector while they sang and cheered and shouted.

"Hector Wilkins! Hector Wilkins!" the voices thundered in unison while the children, fascinated, gathered around.

Someone handed him a long-stemmed glass filled with sparkling liquid and he sniffed the delectable, light wine it contained. Then they were pushing him forward between the rows of benches and forcing him up the steps of the pavilion.

"I give you," announced the conductor jovially, "Hector Wilkins, the Source of All That Exists!"

Hector grabbed a handful of gold braid festooning the man's uniform. "What *is* all this?"

VOICE: THIS, HECTOR, IS SECOND-ORDER REALITY.

No one else heard the words that rustled the trees like a great wind and set up tremors in the bandstand itself.

"Hector! Hector!" shouted the assembly.

"Do something, Hector!" someone urged. "Show us your power!"

"Gee, Mister, make it snow!" piped a grinning tyke.

REALITY, HECTOR. BASIC. TRUE. ACTUAL. WITH ALL THE LOGICAL INHIBITIONS STRIPPED AWAY. BERKELEIANISM IN ITS RAWEST ASPECT. PURE PERCEPTUAL CONCEPTION.

There was an odd familiarity about the words.

Hector shoved the conductor aside and stared up into the sky. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"A light, horse. You got a light?" The mustached tuba player thrust an unlit pipe before him.

He elbowed the man away.

"Give us a miracle, Hector!" the crowd shouted.

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"Just a light, horse," reiterated the tuba player.

Hector stared in confusion at the tobacco-filled bowl. And it burst into flames.

The crowd roared its delight.

"Didn't have to put yourself out none," commented a trombone player. "Could have used a simple match." He held up a crude, sulphur-tipped stick.

Desperate with fear and uncertainty, Hector impulsively snatched the match from the man's fingers. Part of his hand and arm and the bell mouth of his trombone came away with it. Then, like a shred being ripped out of a painting, a narrow swath of materiality separated itself from the panorama all about him.

Torn away from the flimsy reality were the breasts of two bandsmen's uniforms, the heads of three other musicians, part of the pavilion's roof, the entire right flank of the crowd, the foliage of three oaks, a distant hill's crest and a broad slice of the sky beyond.

The ribbon of reality fell from Hector's hand and fluttered to the ground while broad cracks appeared in what was left of the scene—in the sky, across the faces of the assembly, along the ground.

He screamed and clamped his hands in front of his face, while the disintegrating substance of material things spun about him.

Disturbed by his weary tread, puffs of dust rose from the dry road and, caught in eddies of the wind, swirled against his face. He coughed and brought his hand up to fan a path for clear air.

He reached a bend in and paused to watch a carriage approach, leaving an angry column of dust in its wake. He leaped the gutter and retreated through the dust-filmed weeds to escape being enveloped in the backwash of the wheels. Then he watched the cart pass.

Flop . . . flop . . . flop . . .

It was drawn by two animals—a horse and a mule. Its occupants were a man and a woman—the latter a misshapen midget, the former a giant whose immense bulk was hardly contained in the small confines of the seat.

Flop . . . flop . . . flop . . .

The wagon lurched from side to side, jerking the animals first this way, then that as it proceeded on its course.

Flop . . . flop . . . flop . . .

Then Hector saw the explanation for the sharp, thudding sound. One wheel was a spoked disc that smoothly carried its share of the weight. The other, however, was a solid square of wood which pivoted against the road first on one apex, flopped the adjacent side down into the dust, then pivoted on the next point.

The wagon disappeared around

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the bend and he stepped back toward the road, lifting his leg high over a thorny weed. And he saw that on one foot he wore a slipper, on the other a dress shoe, both caked with slimy mud from the ditch. Closer inspection showed one red sock and one green. And, where he had worn a gray, striped suit, he now had on blue trousers atrociously mismatched with a maroon jacket.

Frantically casting about for the meaning behind his incongruous experiences, he brought his hands up before his face. Then he swore in a hopeless, small voice as he stared in horror at his fingers. They didn't match! Palm placed against palm, the hands were incompatible. Thumb opposed little finger and little finger opposed thumb.

The fact was inescapable—*he had two right hands!*

Driven by a sudden terror, he struck out across the field, running, falling, picking himself up and racing on again. He finally collapsed and lay exhausted in the coarse, dirty weeds, face buried in the crook of an arm.

Hector.

The Voice jolted him awake and he sat up.

It was night now, and a tiny moon rode high in the sky, anomalously casting an enormous wealth of effulgence on the nocturnal landscape.

How, he wondered, would he escape from this reality? He had stumbled over a brink into the pitch blackness of infinity and found himself in a Nineteenth Century park. There he had ripped the fabric of material substance to shreds, only to land on a dusty road.

Inspired by the last recollection, he grabbed a handful of grass and pulled. It came up by the roots. Then he clawed at the ground, digging down, down—until his nails cracked and his hands bled. But there was only solid earth beneath him.

He raised soiled, bruised fingers to his stubbled cheeks and was more depressed than horrified to find that he still had two right hands.

THE PROPOSITION IS THAT ALL PARADOXES STEM FROM CONFUSING AN OBJECT WITH ITS OWN BACKGROUND.

Hector lurched to his feet and frantically scanned the field for some place to hide. More stentorian words crashed down on him:

POLAR-RELATED SYMBOLS ARE THE BROAD BRACKETS OF EXISTENCE, THE BOOK FOR ALL MATERIAL REALITY.

He retreated toward the shadowy sanctuary of a copse, but drew up sharply when he realized the words were coming as forcibly from there as from the sky or hills.

LET AN ARTIST PAINT A PICTURE

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OF A PAINTING WITHIN THE SAME PAINTING. THERE YOU HAVE THE ULTIMATE PERCEPTUAL PARADOX—AN OBJECT ATTEMPTING TO EXPLAIN ITSELF—A CONTAINER CONTAINING ITSELF—A REDUCTIO AD INFINITUM, AD ABSURDUM.

There was something familiar about the words, their inflection.

"You're Spankor!" he exclaimed. "Arthur Spankor!"

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME, WILKINS.

Still the Voice hadn't admitted the identity.

"What's happening? Where am I?"

THERE'S NO TIME FOR FRIVOLOUS CONJECTURE. YOU HAVE ALL THE ESSENTIALS. WE COVERED THEM LONG AGO.

The academic tone, the refusal to be led astray from the mainstream of discussion—it was as though the cloak had been turned back twenty-three years and Hector were once more fidgeting in the rear of the classroom.

He could even picture Spankor's restive eyes searching the ceiling for precise words as the gray-haired professor droned on:

PREMISE ONE: I THINK, THEREFORE I AM. MIND CREATES AS IT IDEATES, ALWAYS PROTECTING ITSELF FROM DISCERNMENT OF ITS CREATIVE CAPABILITY. ALL EXISTENCE IS SUBJECTIVE. PSYCHE UNKNOWINGLY GIVES BIRTH TO THE MATERIAL.

Hector started as lagging memory dredged up a fuller relationship with Spankor. Arthur Spankor, the father. Andrew Spankor, his son. Young Spankor—athletic, friendly to the extreme of naive fellowship.

Spankor and Ruth. Hector well remembered and savored the connection now. Ruth and Andy Spankor. But it hadn't lasted long. There'd been the party, the case of liquor, Ruth inveigled into excessive drink, the scene in Hector's car. Later, there had been a marriage of expedience, but it suited his purpose at the time, even though, as it turned out, fate had rescued him from the inconvenience of involuntary fatherhood.

Watching the lost hope in Spankor's eyes each time he and Ruth met accidentally and glanced at each other—it had been fun for a while. Until Andy was found crushed beneath his overturned racing car.

PREMISE TWO: ALL REALITY IS BOUNDED BY PAIRS OF COMPLEMENTARY CONCEPTS ESTABLISHED BY MIND IN GIVING DEFINITION TO MATTER AND ENERGY, SPACE AND TIME.

Hector stiffened. What if the old man was vindictive over the death of his son? It was, after all, possible. He had seen the elder Spankor several times following the accident. And always

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there had been that withdrawn stare, that expression of intense, speculative detachment.

But what could Spankor do? (Hector pointedly ignored the advantage the Voice obviously enjoyed at the moment.) What retributive harm could be feared from a wizened, old man (he had been almost seventy then) who must certainly be—

Terror swamped his reasoning as Hector remembered abruptly that Spankor had followed his son in death fifteen years ago!

YOU HAVE CREATED YOUR NIGHT—

The tiny moon blinked out, abandoning the dusty road and dirt-encrusted field to impenetrable darkness.

—AND DAY.

The sun sprang up, beating every feature of the landscape with its warm light.

COLD—

Dismal clouds covered the sky and Hector glanced in astonishment at the snowdrift that enveloped him up to his hips, at the glaciers which reared like cliffs on his right and left.

—AND HOT.

Winter's residue melted down instantly and its vestiges of snow and ice were swirled away on the breath of a flushing vernal wind.

LOVE—

Hector stared at the scores of simple folks of the farms and fields who prostrated themselves in abject submission all around him.

—AND HATE.

The farmers and townspeople rose, milling about as they cast ominous glances at him.

DISTURB ONE OF THE ORDERLY BRACKETS OF CONCEPTUAL REALITY, OR LET A FEATURE OF THE PICTURE BECOME PART OF ITS OWN BACKGROUND, AND YOU DISRUPT THE WHOLE SWEEP OF SUBJECTIVE EXISTENCE. ALL CREATION COLLAPSES. RULES OF ORDER AND LOGIC NO LONGER HOLD. YOU HAVE TO START FROM SCRATCH.

One of the women spat at Hector. He turned, only to encounter the venomous leers of a line of advancing men.

"Damn Hector!" exclaimed a bearded farmer.

"We ask for rain," complained another vehemently, "and he gives us dust!"

"String him up!"

He bolted and charged head down into a knot of women. Finally breaking free of their clawing nails, he sprinted for the road.

The crowd gave heated chase, bitterly shouting its intentions.

At the edge of the field, though, he stumbled, recovered his balance and stood there panting. Then he watched an infinite succession of carriages, each drawn by a horse and mule and each with one square wheel and one round wheel, advancing along the road.

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He stared in the other direction and saw a single person trudging forward, head lowered and shoulders slumping. Then a second man sprang into existence behind the first, a third behind the second—until there was another infinite progression to match that of the carriages.

A rock, hurled by one of the pursuing farmers, crashed against his head and he fell forward into the gutter.

Hector Wilkins leaned against the building and explored the throbbing laceration above his temple. The hand came away bloodstained but, studying it, he felt a deep consolation. At least, the hand was a valid *left* hand once again.

He tried to push away from the wall. But he lurched off balance and the crutch went flying from under his armpit. He collapsed on the sidewalk.

Sensing new horror, he looked down.

His left leg was missing, the trousers cuff drawn up and tucked under his belt. A cry of desperation trailed off into a sob when he discovered his right arm, too, was gone, its empty sleeve nestling in the side pocket of his coat.

"Spankor!" he shouted in anguish.

Silence.

His hand went reflexively to his head—and discovered that he was now bald!

"Spankor!"

He tried to stare up into the sky. And he verified a festering suspicion. He was blind in one eye!

"Spankor! Spankor! Spankor!"

PANIC IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR DEDUCTIVE REASONING.

The Voice poured down from above, crashing against the building, rebounding from the sidewalk.

"Spankor! Help me!"

THE KEY IS THERE. KEY AND LOCK. UP AND DOWN. NORTH AND SOUTH. NIGHT AND—

"For God's sake! Don't start that again!"

POLAR OPPOSITES ARE THE PARENTHESES OF REALITY. FLOOR, CEILING. EARTH, SKY. ELECTRON, UNIVERSE. WITHIN, WITHOUT. BUT YOU CAN'T LET WITHOUT GET WITHIN WITHIN.

Hector sobbed and beat his fist against the sidewalk. Then he wondered whether he detected a note of sardonic amusement in the Voice.

"Spankor! I *don't know* what's going on! Help me!"

THE DEVIL HINDERS THESE WHO HINDER OTHERS.

"All right! So Andy and I didn't get along! But I didn't make him buy that fool racing car! I didn't know about him and Ruth!"

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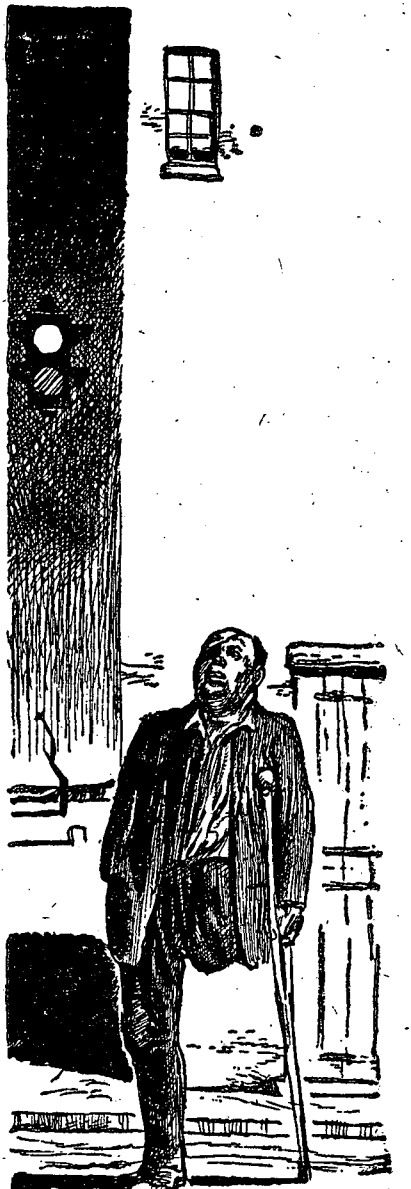

TRUTH, LIE. REAL, FALSE. BLACK, WHITE. GOOD, BAD.

"Oh, God, God!"

SATAN, SATAN.

"How are you doing it? What are you pulling off?"

Silence.

"Stop it, Spankor! Damn you—let me go!"

Silence.

Hector retrieved the crutch and wedged it under his arm. With spiteful resignation, he hauled himself erect and surveyed his surroundings.

The building was tall—perhaps twenty or thirty stories. But it contained only one window. And in the side confronting him was a single door.

He turned and saw that, although the structure itself suggested the proximity of a whole complex of downtown buildings, it was the only one on a vast plain. It fronted on a single street, with a single curb, gutter and sidewalk.

On his left was a sole intersection. Or, he assumed, it would have been an intersection if there had been a cross street there. Above the spot was a lonely, suspended traffic signal with but one illuminated eye that shone a steady red.

Parked against the curb was a lone automobile resting on a single wheel. Across the plain a lonely tree rose from the grassless

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surface and, at the top of a broad trunk, sent out a single bough that branched out into a forlorn twig holding a solitary leaf.

Thud-clump . . . thud-clump . . . thud-clump . . .

Hector glanced down the sidewalk. A man with one arm and also using a crutch because he had but one leg was approaching. There was a black patch over his left eye and he displayed a flaccid smile opening up on a single tooth in a cavernous mouth. He would have been completely bald, Hector discerned, except for one strand of hair. And he had a single ear.

Thud-clump . . . thud-clump . . . thud-clump . . .

Hector took a frightened step backward on his crutch, filled with a cold horror at the sight of the grinning thing closing in on him.

The man took another step and Hector brought his crutch up threateningly before him.

The man disappeared.

And Hector wilted before a sudden, overwhelming loneliness. He crumpled against the side of the building and slid down to the pavement, abysmally depressed.

"SPANKOR?"

No answer.

Reluctantly, he glanced around. One of this and one of that and one of the other. It was senseless. But, somehow, he suspected there must be an intelligible pattern to all that had happened. There must be a connective link that was responsible for his transmigration from one bizarre reality to the next. Could he figure out the key and find his way back to his familiar existence?

Polar opposites, Spankor had emphasized—night and day, black and white, here and there.

"Spankor?"

"Yes?" he answered himself.

Startled, he laughed over having yearned so fiercely for Spankor's response that he had provided his own reply.

It was a cinch Spankor wasn't going to answer.

Polar opposites are the brackets of reality, Spankor had said. It was an idea with which Hector was not altogether unfamiliar. More clearly now, he remembered encountering it over two decades earlier—in Spankor's class.

The full scope of existence (the lecturer had proposed) extends between all the complementary concepts the mind can conceive. Take a many-sided, three-dimensional figure, each face paired with a counter-related face on the other side. The polyhedron represents the entire substance of all concrete reality, the faces the limiting conceptual extremities. Puncture one of the sides and the unity of the whole is disrupted. Or, as Spankor had put it: Disrupt one of the orderly brackets

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. . . and you'll disrupt the whole sweep of subjective existence.

But what had all that to do with his predicament? Was he to assume that somewhere in his recent past he had exceeded one of the limiting brackets?

A single cloud climbed above the horizon, darkened threateningly and hurled out a solitary bolt of lightning, accompanied by a lone thunderclap. One huge drop of rain fell on the plain.

The key is there, Spankor had said.

The sun set behind the only hill that interrupted the even sweep of the horizon and the light of a lonely star burst forth in the desolate sky.

One building, one street, one raindrop, one star. A world of cryptic reality inhabited by one man with one leg, arm, eye, ear and one strand of hair and driving the only car in existence—a vehicle with only one wheel.

A world of oneness.

Unity.

One of a polar-related pair?

If so, what was its opposite?

Oneness, one—many? *How* many opposed the concept *one?*

It was like wandering aimlessly in a semantic jungle.

One—many—infinity.

Of course—an *infinite number!*

And he readily remembered two infinite numbers he had recently encountered—the endless progression of carriages, facing an equally endless array of foot travelers in the reality of the dusty road.

Next he had abruptly entered an existence characterized by a singleness of all things.

Excited over his intuitive perception, he pressed on with the mental exploration. Maybe he *had* found a key! Maybe he *was* nearing a solution!

How had he gotten into the dusty-road world? Better yet—was there any underlying concept, suggestive of one half of a polar relationship perhaps, which had characterized that former reality?

A wagon with a round and a square wheel. A giant and a midget. A horse and a mule. His own shoe and slipper. Red and green socks. His two right hands—hands that had failed to match.

That was it!

A reality that exaggerated the concept "mismatch"!

Then, by extention, *that* underlying negative concept should have been balanced off by its positive counterpart in the previous reality.

Mismatch—match.

Match?

Of course—the "match" he had snatched from the trombone player's hand. A match was a light, wasn't it? Hadn't the tuba player asked, "You got a light?"

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He sat up rigidly, new resolution stimulating his thoughts.

A reality of "light." Shimmering noonday light in a park where a band played "light" music (even "The Charge of the Light Brigade") and an unbelievably "weightless" child had leaped into his arms. A young man and woman engaging in "light" conversation. "Light" wine.

And the opposite to light was —darkness. The impenetrable, ebon infinity into which he had plunged from his first world of altered reality? Certainly!

It was all much clearer now. That first second-order reality had been a world of "heat." Stifling, humid air. "Hot" music. A kid "hot" with the dice and a building bursting spontaneously into flame. A "sultry" blonde. Perspiration rolling down his face.

Hot . . . what?

Hot opposed cold, of course. But he hadn't been cold in his world of basic or first-order reality, had he? Nor had he been "calm," "out cold," "cool as a cucumber" or "frigidly indifferent."

No. But *Ruth* had!

All her life her stoic detachment, her utter frigidity, her calm tolerance had irked him to the point of constant frustration.

But it couldn't have been simply the pressure of that trait in his wife that had jerked the foundation from under his world of familiar reality. Wasn't *everybody always* encountering excesses of one sort or another?

But, then, *he* wasn't everybody. He would be a very special person if, as Spankor maintained, it was a Berkeleian existence—a world where mind alone existed and reigned supreme over the matter it unconsciously brought into being. In that case, he would be the *only* one who counted. And it would be only logical that if any polar-related excess could affect anybody, he would be the first to respond.

Exhausted over the ordeal of his mental exploration, Hector slumped back against the wall. He had made immense headway in beating a rational path through the semantic maze. He, himself, had discovered underlying pattern, method. He had found the key that Spankor had dangled before him.

But what was he to do with it? How to apply it. After all, the key was only half of the solution that might return him to his original reality. There also had to be a lock in which to fit it.

He rose and hobbled down the sidewalk on his crutch, mulling over the discovery that it was a sort of physico-semantic reality he was in—an existence in which mind, as it created and gave meaning to its creation at the same time, was the supreme modifier of matter.

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If that was so, then the road back to his first-order world must lie in reverse manipulation of symbols. Perhaps if he came to grips, in some way, with the first concept of oneness he had encountered in this version of the material world—perhaps that would open the door that had locked behind him.

He dredged his memory.

Crutch—that was it! He had first noticed his crutch, then the fact that one of his legs was missing. The forked shaft was a symbol of the singularity of his leg as opposed to the plurality of carriages in the preceding reality.

Balancing on his remaining leg, he swung the forked shaft in front of him, manipulating it as a magician would his wand; thumped its rubber tip on the pavement; flogged the air with it.

Nothing happened.

Disgusted, he hurled it against the building. This overbalanced him and he made a frantic effort to keep from toppling. But his leg went out from under him regardless and he fell . . . fell . . . fell . . .

Soft mud, saturated with stagnant water, received the *sploshing* impact of his body.

He rolled over and sat up, laughing hysterically.

He had made it! He'd retraced his steps back through one stanza of reality! He was in the world of mismatch—the dusty road with its round- and square-wheeled carriage pulled by a horse and a mule.

Anxiously, he took inventory of himself—*two* arms, *two* legs (it made little difference now that both shoes were fashioned for left feet), *two* eyes, each sighted.

He scrambled up the embankment and padded down the road, racing forward to meet the approaching wagon. He reassured himself that the first indigenous effect he had encountered in this existence (and therefore his key back to the preceding one) had been the mismatched wagon wheels. And that was the effect he would have to manipulate in some manner if he was to break through into the Nineteenth Century park.

Arms waving, he intercepted the wagon, seizing the bridles of the animals and pulling them to a halt. He lunged around the side, knelt in the dust and grabbed the square rim of the left wheel.

"Hector's excited." The midget woman snickered.

"Hector's stupid," the giant corrected. "Damned fool's trying to see if those wheels won't get him back to that silly concert."

"Let him go. He'll find out, won't he?"

Hector shouted in triumph as the rectangular wheel came off

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in his hands. He flailed back on his haunches, roiling up a great cloud of dust that swirled in on him, choking and blinding him.

Laughter.

Great tremolant peals of laughter that rocked the ground.

"Damn you, Spankor! Shut up!"

Hector jacknifed to a sitting position and shook his fist at the sky. But he abandoned the threatening gesture when his stare encountered the sun.

It was no well-defined, shimmering disc. Only an immense patch of light—a formless blob of luminous fire that hung in the sky like a giant amoeba. It changed shape as he watched, contracting to an irregular circle, sending out a pseudopod, withdrawing it and dispatching several others.

The reality of the mismatch was gone. In its place was—

Hector recoiled, sickened and despondent.

The ground around him rose and fell in ceaseless, undulant motion. Vaguely resembling a tree, a flabby and slimy thing protruded from the face of a pulsating slope, vacillating, swelling, shrinking.

Distant mountains slithered from outline to outline, restlessly stretching and stooping, developing crests that almost became peaks but, one by one, flowed over on their sides and glided down into the valley.

Ever changing.

Nothing static.

Thunderous laughter.

THERE ARE SOME KEYS THAT FIT MORE THAN ONE LOCK.

"You're lying!" Hector shouted back. "I'm on the right track! I just made a mistake, that's all! You're trying to throw me off!"

KEY, LOCK. THEY'RE POLAR-CONNECTED TOO. MANIPULATING OPPOSING CONCEPTS TO CORRECT POLAR RELATIONSHIPS IS LIKE TRYING TO MAKE A CONTAINER CONTAIN ITSELF, A FIGURE OCCUPY ITS OWN BACKGROUND.

"Go to hell! Leave me alone! I'll dope it out, all right."

Silence.

"Spankor?" He rode an undulation of the hill beneath him and stared expectantly into the sky. He hadn't really meant to dismiss the Voice.

"Spankor, I thought I had it all figured out. I was sure I had discovered all the links. *But I don't understand this world, Spankor!*"

He hid his face in the concavity of his trembling hands and hunched over in utter dejection.

AMORPHISM—NOTHING WITH DEFINITE SHAPE. FORMLESS REALITY THE ANTITHESIS OF THE ORDERLY SYMMETRICAL CONCEPTS OF GEOMETRICAL FIGURES. THE RIGID FORMALITY OF SHAPE AND SUBSTANCE BELONGING TO THE

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CIRCLE AND THE SQUARE, ON THE ONE HAND. ON THE OTHER HAND —THIS.

Hector watched the interminable wiggling and squirming of all creation about him.

YOU MANIPULATED THE WAGON WHEELS WHEN YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN USING THE HORSE AND MULE SYMBOL AS YOUR KEY.

Hector understood now. But, then, he cowed before a new realization: Spankor was so vastly superior. Spankor was in complete command of the situation. He was like a god. And still Spankor had said it was he, Hector Wilkins, who was the Chief Determiner.

Was it all an insidious deception?

Of course it was!

In the first place, it was only logical that there could be but one mentality, one Determiner in a Berkeleian existence—the Prime Mover.

But in this reality, in all the realities he had experienced, he, Hector, *was not* the Chief Determiner! It was Spankor who always held the upper hand!

"Spankor!" he baited. "It's *my* world, isn't it?"

YES, IT'S MY WORLD.

Hector started at the other's unexpected frankness. "It's—*your* world?" he asked weakly.

YES, IT'S YOUR WORLD.

Hector lurched erect, screaming, "Go to hell! Damn you, let me alone!"

And he meant it this time as he hurled abuse into the sky between sobs.

He could get along without Spankor! Even if he was only a creature of the Voice, he'd *show* him! He'd hunt him down, find him somewhere in one of the realities. Damn him!

What the hell! He didn't need any Voice booming down from the sky, leading him down blind alleys! He'd show Spankor! He'd be his own heckler!

"I need help," he said, shrugging prosaically.

Then he threw back his head. THE DEVIL HINDERS THESE WHO HINDER OTHERS, he mocked Spankor in a voice that he imagined was no slouch in its mountain-rattling quality.

And indeed it wasn't. For the distant hills paused in their ever-continuing metamorphosis and trembled before his words.

He laughed in great gusts at the effect and went on with the game. "Can I get back to the original reality by retracing my steps?"

THAT WOULD BE A DAMNED FOOL WAY TO GO ABOUT IT, he answered. TOO MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ERROR. YOU'LL ONLY KEEP LANDING IN NEW REALITIES.

Why, he even sounded as authoritative as the Voice!

"What, then, can I do?"

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CONSIDER: THERE IS A CORRECT KEY, AS YOU FOUND OUT, BUT TOO MANY LOCKS THAT IT WILL FIT. CONSIDER FURTHER: DEDUCTIVE REASONING IS A UNIVERSAL KEY.

Hector started. Had that been his own answer, or the Voice's? But then, it didn't matter all that much. Not now. For he had instantly recognized the intuitive logic of the advice. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

If he was the Prime Mover, or even if he only aspired (with reasonable justification) to become the Supreme Causal Effect, then he should be able to *alter* any reality to suit his own purposes.

Over there, where the slithering mountains stroked the overcast sky in endless motion, for instance—in *his* world that would be about where the skyline of the city would be located.

The mountains steadied and, in a single convulsion, reformed themselves into the exact geometrical outline he had in mind.

He shouted exuberantly.

And there, on the undulant plain, should be expressway to his suburban district.

Instantly it was there, replete with speeding automobiles and buses and snuggling under the low-hanging smog that rose miasmalike from nearby industrial plants.

Hector Wilkins leaped with delight, faltered as the ground convulsed under him, then angrily commanded it to be still. It complied.

He could succeed—*was* succeeding! God—he *had* to do it right! He *had* to get *everything* back in place, exactly where it belonged! The world, as he had known it in those last few seconds before his detachment, was too full of hope and promise.

Ruth was gone—dead. But somehow he knew instinctively he would never have to pay for her death. Something had happened in the last few minutes before he had toppled into the second-order reality of the "hot" world. He couldn't remember what. But he *did* know that, as a result, he would never be accused of his wife's death. Odd how something so important could have escaped his mind.

Dismissing his forgetfulness, he waved his arm in a flamboyant gesture and a familiar ridge of hills, steady in form, took shape on the southern horizon. Flushed with success, he spread his hands and a vast stretch of suburban reality sprang into existence on his left—neat rows of houses with fresh lawns and flowers, chain link fences, sidewalks echoing the patter of children at play. Recognizing it all, he leered in triumph as he wiped the perspiration of his effort from his begrimed, stubbled cheeks.

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He gestured in the other direction—and the suburban setting instantly became complete. There was the Randolphs' house on the corner, with George out preparing for his usual Sunday barbecue while the rest of the family was at church. And there was his own home, quiet and trim and elegant in the floral finery Ruth's meticulous attention had brought forth.

There! He had it all back in place!

Hector started across the street, looking down at his dirty, torn clothes and hoping none of the neighbors would see him.

But—just his luck—old man Ashburn was coming around the side of his house two doors down the block. Decrepit with age, he helplessly followed his wobbling cane and palsied legs off the flagstone walk and into his daughter's caladium bed. For which he'd catch immeasurable hell, as he usually did.

Abruptly, the suburban setting wavered, as though it were only a reflection in a still pond that had just been rippled by a sudden wind.

Then it was all gone—the house, the familiar hills, the expressway that sliced across the plain, the skyline of the city.

And a new reality took shape around him.

It was a constricted setting—a single room. A glaring white room with a huge pane of glass for one of its walls. Beyond the window was a spotless corridor down which walked a woman in a nurse's uniform.

Around him were orderly rows of elevated—cribs! And each crib contained a squirming, crying or sleeping baby.

He understood, even before the Voice (his own or Spankor's?) blared out:

FIRST-ORDER REALITY MUST BE RE-ESTABLISHED VALIDLY, OR IT WON'T RETAIN ITS FORM AND SUBSTANCE.

He backed off toward a side door, vaguely acknowledging the fact that he *could* recreate everything just as it was—just as he wanted it to be. But he would always face the harrowing possibility that it would be washed away by another confusion of polar opposites—just as this one had been by—

SENILITY ON THE ONE HAND —THE SENILITY OF OLD MAN ASHBURN—AND INFANCY THAT ABOUNDED IN THE MATERNITY SECTION OF A HOSPITAL.

Again, he didn't know or much care whether the words were Spankor's or his own as he gripped the door knob.

He saw now what had to be done. He must re-establish the reality he wanted—the familiar one. But, in rebuilding it, he would have to circumvent the

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triggering effect that had started him off on his hectic transmigrations. He would have to re-enter that original reality at a time *prior to* Ruth's death. And he would have to avoid killing her. For that action would only again touch off his psycho-physical convulsions.

He went through the door—into the delivery room. And one of the nurses assisting at the birth turned and her eyes flashed perplexity above the white gauze mask.

TAKE CARE, the Voice roared. DANGER POINT. OF ALL THE POLAR-RELATED CONCEPTS, THERE IS ONE SUPREMELY LIMITING PAIR.

He realized then, but not with very much surprise, that the Voice *was* his—*had been his all along!* He had only *assumed* it was Spankor's.

WE HAVE, ON THE ONE HAND, BIRTH—

To hell with it! And, immediately, he banished the Voice to eternal obscurity. He didn't need the self-fawning device of unconscious autoconversation any longer. He could devise his destiny in a more rational manner.

Angrily, he swept away the delivery room setting with a flick of his hand and brought the suburban reality back with another, restoring all familiar things to their familiar places.

He stood on his own lawn, staring in through the picture window. And he saw he had recreated everything as he had intended—*before* Ruth's death had sent him reeling out of his reality. His wife sat in the upholstered chair, trifling away the hours with her inane needlework.

All he had to do now was go in the back way, clean himself up and—

He stared. He *was* in there—pacing in front of her chair, his hands clenched into tight knots behind him!

Somewhere in the distance a church bell tolled its summons to Sunday morning worship.

And Hector backed away from the window, bewildered and frantic.

He was shut out! Barred from the right to his normal existence by the presence of—*himself!* A duplication in the same reality. There, beyond the picture window, was the other he—in possession of his identity, blocking him from the security he had established for himself, from the modest wealth he had accumulated. There was the other Hector Wilkins who, in a few minutes, would kill Ruth Wilkins, regardless of whether *he* wanted it so!

Hector raced across the lawn and pounded on the door. Confounded, he only knew now he not only had to prevent Ruth's death, but also had to dispose of this replica of himself.

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Once more he pounded the door—and got no results. He put his shoulder to the panel and rammed it—again and again.

The door splintered off its hinges and imploded into the hallway.

Hector recovered his balance and stared over at himself, standing there in the archway leading into the living room. Beyond, he could see the overturned chair and Ruth's body crumpled on the hearth.

The other Hector had a revolver and was pointing it at him. And, in that instant, total realization exploded in his mind.

He remembered now how, after he had killed Ruth, he had almost panicked on hearing the persistent pounding at his door. How he had gotten his revolver. How, when the door had crashed open, he had been torn between fear and inspiration.

He had been inspired by the sight of a whiskered and grimed madman—someone who had broken into his home at an incredibly propitious moment. Someone who could be palmed off as an intruder who had killed Ruth before he could get his gun to protect himself and his wife!

This same inspiration and speculation was reflected in the other Hector's eyes as he raised the revolver.

"No, no!" Hector shouted, backing toward the door.

THE SUPERNAL LIMITING PAIR. BIRTH, ON THE ONE HAND, AND DEATH ON THE—

The revolver recoiled twice and Hector collapsed on the floor.

Twin coals of agony in his chest, he watched the confused expression on the other's face—the reflexive twitching that went on as he finally recognized his victim as *himself*. And Hector could almost see the memory of this and the recent few minutes being traumatically erased from the other's mind.

ALL PARADOXES OF REALITY STEM FROM CONFUSING AN OBJECT WITH IT'S OWN BACKGROUND. HECTOR WILKINS, THE OBJECT. HECTOR WILKINS, A PROMINENT FEATURE OF HIS OWN BACKGROUND.

The Hector Wilkins with the gun dropped it and—disappeared.

The other rolled over in the doorway, gripped in a mortal convulsion.

OF ALL THE LIMITING CONCEPTS, THE SUPREMELY DETERMINATE ONE IS BIRTH—AND DEATH.

But even that was only a postulate, Hector knew, bracing himself for the ultimate transmigration as his final gaze fell upon the distant, ornate sign that spelled the subdivision's name. It read:

Paradise Manor.

THE END

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The Dreaming EYES

By MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

Illustrator DOUGLAS

Twice before it had happened—the sudden terror and the sudden glory. Now that it was going to happen again, he loved and loathed himself.

THE COLONEL stood gazing out of his office window at the scene below. He was bored, bored, bored. The revolt on Algol IV was over; the leaders among the rebellious colonists had long since been swept away to slavery in the microlite mines on Titan; all that was left now was the mopping-up. Their peasant followers—third generation colonists still in debt to the Federation for their grandfathers' passage—must be taught their lesson, which meant wholesale deportation to farm labor camps in the frozen north, to make way for fresh workers from the Three Planets to take over the lands they had forfeited. It was all perfunctory, necessary work; but did it need a full colonel any longer to supervise it? The colonel thought not, but his appeals for transfer had gone unheeded. He was never happy except in military action.

Idly watching as he chewed over his complaints, the colonel's attention was arrested by a minor fracas erupting in the road beneath his window. A sergeant —one of the good tough troopers from the regular army—was herding the last lot of locals into the waiting trucks. They shuffled slowly along, most of them, poor fools, sobbing now that it was too late, but thoroughly cowed and beaten. And then suddenly one

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of them turned balky. When the sergeant prodded him in the back he resisted, stood his ground, refused to climb into the truck before him. The sergeant promptly knocked him flat in the dust of the road. He lay there on his back, half conscious, staring upwards with dazed eyes.

The day had been dull, with heavy clouds overhead. By some trick of weather, at that moment a dazzling ray from Algol pierced the clouds and was thrown like a spotlight on to the man below. It lighted his face so that for an instant his eyes seemed to be glaring directly into the colonel's. Without moving, the colonel reached behind him to his desk and caught up his field-glasses and focused them.

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They were remarkable eyes to be set in that dull peasant face—grey, deep-set, swimming with tears. Naked emotion shone from them—fear, hatred, anger, and a sort of stubborn pride. Then the ray of sunlight shifted and the man was again only a ragged huddled figure in the dust.

But the moment had been enough. The colonel felt himself trembling. Like a knife in his heart, suddenly the scene was transformed and he was back in a childhood day he had thought forever forgotten, in the wooded foothills of his native country on Terra.

They had been three 12-year-olds—the baker's son, the blacksmith's son, and the policeman's son who had grown up to become the colonel, risen from the ranks. It was he who owned the shotgun, and the others, as was proper, were his satellites, who followed him humbly and would be allowed a shot only after he had been given first chance.

The trouble was that there had been no first chance; they had roamed the hills for hours, and met no signs of game. They were footsore and irritable, and the other two were already whining about giving up and turning back home. "Go if you want," he told them, "but if you do I'll never ask you out again. I'm staying."

At that very moment a jackrabbit emerged from nowhere and hopped across the field.

His gun was up and aimed in a second. But his nerves too were worn, and his aim was bad. The animal was hit, but not in a vital spot. It lay kicking and writhing in the grass.

He ran to it, followed by the other boys, and picked it up. The bullet had caught it in the groin, and bright red blood spurted from the wound over his fingers. He shifted to wring its neck.

It looked directly at him, the flat animal eyes alive with pain and terror. For a second they held his own.

And a strange seizure took hold of him, like a long shudder from head to foot. He ceased to be his human self; he *became* the wounded rabbit, he was shaken by its agony, melted by its fear. He was nauseated, but he could not overcome the flood of feeling.

The seizure passed, and he was himself again. He darted a shamefaced glance at his companions; they had noticed nothing. Calmly he twisted the furry neck until the creature lay limp in his hands.

And then all of a sudden something else possessed him, something for which he had no words—a glory, an ecstasy, a triumph. He felt twelve feet high and omnipotent.

He took his gun again from the

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boy at whom he had thrust it. "No more," he said. "I'm going home." They clamored, and he threw the dead rabbit at their feet. "Take it if you want it," he told them. He strode away, the gun in his arms, not waiting to see if they followed.

That had been 30 years ago, buried so deep it had been lost to memory.

Below, the sergeant kicked experimentally at the prostrate figure. It quivered, but made no attempt to rise.

The colonel stood rigid and immobile at the window. And up from the depths came another hidden memory.

That night in the camp on Syrtis Major on Mars.

She had not been a woman; she was a Martian female. But in the dark she had had the semblance of a woman.

He was still only a sergeant then, barely of age, stationed in the Army of Occupation after the last of the remnant of fighting Martians had been subdued. He hated the Martians with a fierce hatred. Because they were what little was left of so old and so alien a culture—because of their undisguised scorn for the Terrans who had conquered them—because they had resisted so stubbornly and had had to be hunted cell by cell through their underground corridors—because they had once had everything and now had nothing: it was reason enough.

They were too frail and reedy for manual labor; you could—you did—whip them till they died, but you got no useful toil from them. Terra had no troops to spare to keep them on reservations, no funds (with so much needed for military demands on half a dozen planets) to feed and clothe them.

Then the soft fools at Federation headquarters put a stop to hunting them; strict orders from above forbade their further extermination. What was left of them was to be preserved as a living museum—the colonel remembered how he had snorted when that ruling had been told him. Scientists came to study them—highbrow idiots who mouthed words like respect and admiration and compassion, who fed and paid the subjects of their study—and had to be protected by the very army they openly despised. The colonel smiled as he recalled how few of the Martians submitted willingly, how often the mush-brained scientists (subversive traitors, coddled by their like at headquarters, that was a better name for them) gave up and sneaked home again to Terra, baffled and snubbed, their recording instruments blank. The Martians pre-

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ferred to starve in their underground burrows, or to kill their families and themselves when starvation loomed.

All but a few, so desperate they ventured to roam the domed camps in the freezing night—not to beg, for no Terran would give, but to grab at food and run. Few of them escaped; there were sentries to patrol the camps.

This had been one of those young and desperate, that night—young and desperate and female. But the females were no good, the colonel thought disgustedly, even for the uses to which the females of conquered peoples on Terra could be put; they were made wrong somehow, the men said who had tried: he himself had never stooped so low—and why need any soldier, with women troopers in every regiment?

From his post he had watched the furtive, wavering figure steal through the air-lock, her discarded breathing-mask around her neck, glance hurriedly around with her big myopic eyes without even seeing him standing silent in the shadows, and dart to the nearest cook-tent. He was at the flap when she emerged again, a loaf of bread and a big sausage clasped to her thin breast. He took them from her roughly and grasped her arm so that she could not escape. She stood there, breathing fast; the arm he held was shaking, but she raised her head and looked him full in the eyes.

Those eyes—those strange, light, seemingly unseeing Martian eyes!

And that was the second time it had happened to him.

How could a Terran, who hated all Martians, who spoke, reluctantly, only a few Martian words of command, *become* a Martian female, experience all the shame and outrage and despair she had known?

But he did, unbearably; and to break away from the loathsome response his body did what surprised his mind. He threw down at her feet the food she had stolen. Still grasping her (his fingers tingled with disgust at the contact but he could not let go), he leaned and spat upon it.

Then he released her and pointed to the befouled bread and sausage, and he said the Martian word for "take."

He could feel her struggling with her hunger and her hatred, willing herself to run. He felt her hatred yield. He saw her stoop, sobbing, the strange blue Martian tears streaming down her face, and pick up the nauseating objects. Every iota of her loathing, her compulsion, he shared.

Then she turned and ran with her burden; and when she reached the air-lock he raised his

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needle gun. She fell without a sound, and he left her there for the scavenger corps in the morning.

And for the second time in his life he underwent the glory, the power, the triumph. It swept and shook him, and he felt as if light were bursting from every pore of his being.

The two memories followed so fast on each other's heels that he had relived them both in a mere instant of time. When once again his gaze fell on the scene below the window, it had scarcely changed; only a moment had elapsed. The sergeant had kicked the prostrate man again, and again he had quivered and lain still.

With queer sudden prescience, the colonel knew what thoughts were passing in the sergeant's mind. The clod was useless, more trouble than he would ever be worth, too old and worn in any case to last long in the labor camp; and now he was holding up the line.

Deliberately he drew back his heavy boot and stamped on the face.

The grey eyes which all the while had been holding the colonel's trapped in them were blotted out in blood.

Still staring at the man below, once again the colonel ceased to be himself, and became another. For a breath and a heartbeat, he *was* that man.

He knew all the man's life—the dull, stupid toil, the rare hours of leisure with beer and song among his kind, the blind animal gropings of sex, the narrow provincial piety. Somewhere there had been a wife and children—dead now or slaving in a labor camp. Always there had been the only place he knew, the home from which he was being torn today.

The colonel experienced in his inmost fiber the peasant's anguish and despair. It made him queasy; he swallowed hard to keep from retching.

As he watched, the man died. The sergeant shoved the corpse aside and beckoned to the next man in the queue.

With a wrench the colonel tore himself away from the window, still sick and shivering from his immersion in another's being. He fell into his chair, his head bent to his clasped hands.

And then, just as twice before, came the following glory. He wanted to shout, to sing, to tear piece by piece with his own hands some living thing until it was dead.

Some corner of his official mind noted that the sergeant must be reproved, even lightly punished; the conquered rebels were government property and not to be destroyed without au-

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thority. But the greater part of him was still suffused with that twice-remembered ecstasy. It washed over him and possessed him utterly. His breath came short, there was a tingling in his ears, light shone before his eyes like a golden aura.

Abruptly he seized the visiphone lying on the desk before him, dialed Interplanetary, called for the number of Federation headquarters on Terra.

When his superior's frown showed on the screen he saluted grimly.

"I am reporting," he barked, "that my assignment here is finished. A captain or even a lieutenant can clean up what is left. I am requesting reassignment to a more active post."

A look of almost animal pain, crossed with mingled pride and pleading, swept like a lightning flash over the colonel's face.

"A post," he said, his voice holding desperately to the self-assuredness of the now gradually fading glory, "worthy of the value of my many years of devoted service to the Terran Army."

He saluted again and rang off quickly, before the general's startled gaze should see him revert once more to the commonplace, unregarded drudge he had always been.

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, JULY 2, 1946 AND JUNE 11, 1960 (74 STAT. 208) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF FANTASTIC, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October, 1960.

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MATTHEW T. BIRMINGHAM, JR.
(Business Manager)

[SEAL]

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 6th day of October, 1960.
WILLIAM PROEHMER, Notary Public
State of New York, No. 41-8446350—Queens County. Cert. filed in New York County.
(My commission expires March 30, 1962.)

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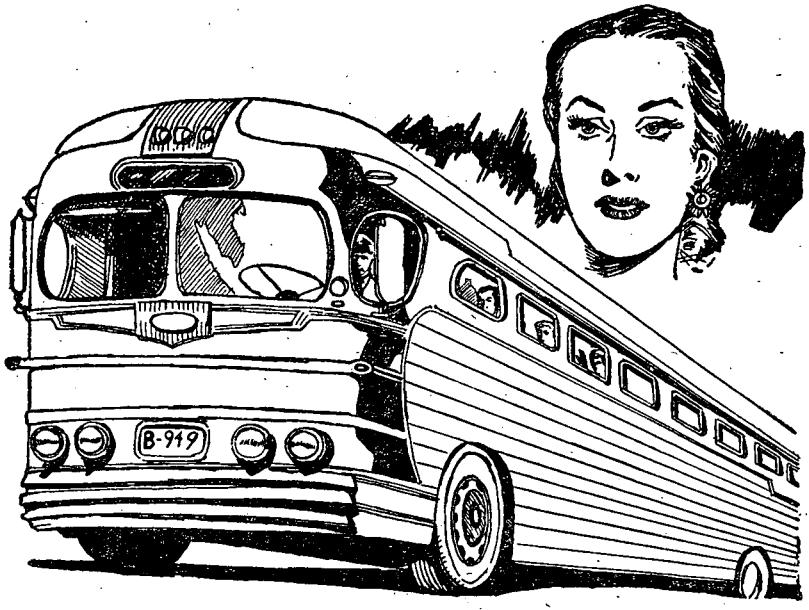

ACCORDING TO PLAN

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator BERNKLAU

The blonde looked as if her touch would be the greatest pleasure. Instead it was just the opposite.

→

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CAREY PHILIPS would probably have given the blonde only a minor survey as he moved to the rear of the bus, except that she was a brunette. Although he normally preferred a seat beside the window, and there were two vacant behind where she was sitting, he sat down beside her, instead, and took another look at her hair while pretending to observe people passing on the sidewalk.

It was true. Her long dark hair had short yellow roots. Carey was properly amazed. He'd seen many a *reverse* case, of course, but this was a new twist. And Carey was a news reporter, so—

"I beg your pardon . . ." he said haltingly.

Warm, startled blue eyes were suddenly looking into his, and Carey flashed a lopsided grin at her, one he'd used to advantage on many occasions. This time, however, it didn't seem to take.

"Oh, no!" she said, in a small, weak voice. "You're Carey Philips!" Her face was suddenly intensely pale. Before he could even wonder how she knew—his column carried a by-line, but no picture—she added, "But you're on the wrong bus!"

"I'm on the—?" he blurted, bewildered, then looked at the reverse side of the canvas roll above the windshield at the front of the bus. "I'll be damned. You're right!" he said. "But how—?"

"Oh, this is terrible," she said, nervously. "My first month on the job, too. We— We're not even supposed to meet for another four months . . . I'd better get off."

"Whoa, there, young lady," Carey said, hastily enclosing her upper arm within his fingers as she tried to get up and past him. "How do you know who I am? Or that I got the wrong bus by mistake, or—" She pulled free of his grasp, then slumped back, abruptly.

"You won't believe me," she sighed. Carey thought he sensed a faint trace of relief in the sigh, as though she were suddenly realizing with considerable happiness that she was safe from some sort of exposure.

"I might," he said. "Go ahead and tell me."

She glanced around a moment, as if ascertaining that she was not being observed, then faced him, her tiny heart-shaped face almost laughably solemn. "I think I *will*," she said, coming to a decision. "But please be careful you don't touch me."

"Lady, I assure you my intentions are—"

"No, no, no," she whispered, exasperated. "I didn't mean *that* sort of thing at all! I mean be careful not to come into contact

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with me at all. It's— It's fatal. That's why I'm wearing gloves."

A psycho! thought Carey, disappointed. But what the hell, it might make a nice filler for a column that was pretty skimpy otherwise. "Really?" he said, feigning acute credibility on his face. "How does it work? Electric shock, or what?"

"It won't work at all, unless you're on my list," she said, with a tiny smile. "You see that woman up near the front, standing?"

Carey looked. Up front, before the three-seater that ran lengthwise over the wheel, there was a middle-aged woman, hanging onto a strap and conversing rapidly, with a lot of chuckles, with another woman, seated there. Not especially distinguished, either. Green cloth coat, pink hat with rosebuds on it, and a shopping bag dangling from one freckled hand. Hair gray, face a little tired-looking. That was all.

Carey turned back to the girl beside him.

"I see her, yes. What about her?"

"She's going to die, today," said the girl. "I managed to touch her earlier, when the bus was crowded. She never noticed. It's always easier in crowds."

Despite himself, Carey shivered. Psycho she might be, but her cold-blooded pronouncement gave him goosebumps. "Uh—" he said, stuck for a casual comeback, "you just—uh—hanging around to be in on the *fun*, or what?"

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," the girl assured him. "I'd just as soon not be around when it happens. It's just that this is the bus I usually take home, so I just stayed on after—after my work was done." Her voice dropped on the last phrase, guiltily.

"I sense that you don't like your work," Carey remarked dryly.

She made a wry face. "It's not so bad. As long as I don't have to watch, I mean. After all, *someone* has to do it, so it may as well be me." She smiled brightly as she finished.

"Excuse my idiotic non-comprehension, but— Someone has to do *what?*" said Carey, frowning.

"Mark the diers," said the girl. "Otherwise their protective aura would keep them away from harm."

"Oh. Oh, yeah, the protective aura," Carey grunted.

Poor kid. Crazy as a quilt. There was still a point that had him bothered, though. "Would you mind telling me why you've dyed your hair from blonde?" he said. "If you'll excuse the impertinence?"

She flushed a dull crimson. "I did it myself. I didn't think any-

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one would notice. It's the attitudes, that's all. That lady up front, she resents blondes. Thinks they're all hussies, or something. She'd have noticed me right away. So I tinted my hair darker, so she wouldn't give me a second glance. For you, in four months' time, I would have been a blonde."

"But I *notice* blondes," said Carey. "Most men do."

Her smile was shyly embarrassed. "With men, we work it in reverse. Men *like* being touched by women."

Some part of Carey's mind suddenly played back her prior statement, and he detected an odd note. "Just a second; you say you *would* have been a blonde in four months' time for me . . . *Now* what'll you be?"

"Why— It won't be *me* at *all*," she said. "We'll have to send another agent. Possibly a dog. Men love to pet dogs— Oh, but I'm telling you much too much. You shouldn't know anything."

Carey stared at her a moment, then, on an impulse, gripped the sleeve of her dress near the wrist, and tugged down the back of her glove with thumb and forefinger of the other hand. She struggled to get free, but did it quietly, not making any commotion noticeable to anyone but Carey.

"What are you trying to do!" she said, between clenched teeth, her arm straining against his superior strength.

"In drug addiction," he said, gently, "they call it the Cold Turkey cure. I'm just going to touch you, and *not* die, and maybe then you and I can go have a talk with this medical friend of mine, and—"

"You think I'm crazy?" she said, then laughed, suddenly and without amusement, that brief, harsh expulsion of breath that comes with abrupt despair. "But Mister Philips, I'll— *Oh!*"

Carey's index finger was lying lightly upon the back of her hand, and his smile was warm and friendly. "See?" he said. "No ill effects. I feel just great."

"Of *course* you do!" she said, suddenly bursting into tears. "I'm not with Disease. I'm with *Violence!*"

Carey blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"Within seven days, now, you'll die a death of violence," she sobbed, softly. "It wasn't supposed to happen for four months!"

"Easy, honey, easy," Carey said. His heart went out to her. She was young, pretty, and awfully helpless, even if she *was* a screwball. "Don't waste your tears on me. I was a lecherous old reprobate, anyhow."

"*What?*" she said, staring at him through her sparkling tears.

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"I'm not crying over *you!*" Angrily, she got up and squeezed past him to the aisle, jerking her arm free of his attempted grip. "I'm crying because I may very well lose my *job* over this!"

The bus shuddered to a stop beside the curb, and the girl was down the step and out onto the sidewalk almost before Carey had the sense to descend after her.

"Hold on, there," he said, catching up to her as she strode sniffling along the sidewalk, dodging in and out of the people who flocked in and out of a string of stores. "Wait a minute, can't you?"

She spun about to face him. "All right, what?" she snapped.

Carey grinned. "I thought the least you could do is tell me *how* it's going to happen, so I can prepare myself . . ."

"You can't prepare," she said simply, her eyes cold. "It's contrary to the regulations. When death comes to you, it will come from that quarter from which you *least* expect it."

"Oh, now look, lady—" Carey began, but was interrupted by a shrill scream of terror, further up the block. He swung himself about, and looked toward the sound, which was cut off in mid-cry.

At the side of the bus, a crowd of people was gathering, all looking down with horror at something in the street. Carey took in the tableau in an instant, without even moving from where he stood. Someone had been getting off the bus at the next corner, and a car had been coming up beside it. They'd stepped right in front of it.

Between the legs of the gathering crowd, Carey could make out just two things. The victim was wearing a green cloth coat, and the impact of the car had knocked a parcel from her hand to burst open upon the sidewalk: a shopping bag.

"Hell—" Carey gasped, and looked back around to see how the girl was taking the accident. His heart turned to a lump of ice. The brunette-blonde was gone.

"Of *course* it's nonsense, Carey," said Doctor McCleod, shaking his head sagely. "You should have come to me the minute you knew you believed even a *little* of the girl's fantastic story. If you could *see* yourself—I tell you, Carey, if a man came to *you* with a story like this, you'd slip him a fiver for a bottle of scotch, and tell him to forget it the *easy* way."

"But," Carey got out of McCleod's armchair before the desk, and started to pace back and forth on the thick carpet, "I *can't* forget it, Pete! It couldn't

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have been a coincidence, happening like that. Two days ago, only! It feels like I've been awake for a *week!* It's that where-you-least-expect-it part that's got me all unstrung; I've suddenly gotten afraid of crossing the streets, even *with* the lights, and elevators give me palpitations. You know," he added, with a short nervous laugh, "I *walked* up here, to your office. Seven floors!"

"You might have had heart failure," McCleod remarked, with a frown.

"Unh-uh," Carey shook his head. "That's not violence, Pete."

"Take it from me, there's nothing very *serene* about a heart attack, pal!" McCleod said. Then, as the corners of Carey's mouth tightened and grew pale, he added, "But maybe you're right. It doesn't correspond to our notion of violence. Okay, so you don't cross streets, and don't ride elevators. So what? You can still get beaned by falling plaster, or some secretary at the newspaper accidentally runs you through with a letter-opener . . . Sorry, Carey, I guess I shouldn't have said that. Maybe you'd better sit down—"

Carey, his face wet and colorless, sank back into the armchair, his fingers gripping the ends of the wooden arms tightly. Then, all at once, his face went slack, and his eyes widened.

"Think of something?" said McCleod, quickly.

"Yeah!" said Carey, swinging his gaze to meet the other man's. "Yeah, I just thought of something all right! She said where I least expect it, didn't she? So what if I keep on *expecting* it for these next five days? Where is she *then!?*"

"I don't know where *she* will be," McCleod snorted, "but I know where *you'll* be: In a straitjacket, making burbling noises and rolling your eyes at padded walls! Do you realize you could drive yourself crazy, trying to think of all the possible ways there are to die, Carey? Listen, chum, I'm a doctor, and it's a constant wonder to me that *everybody* isn't dead, what with all the things that can stop a life. There are bloodclots, brain hemorrhages, lung paralysis, and shock. Plain, good, old-fashioned shock. A nice one-syllable term for malfunction of just about everything, simultaneously, about which the medical profession knows less than it cares to admit. And that's only *inside* you. From the outside, we have germs, poisons, collision, puncture, heat, cold, gas, concussion— Good grief, Carey, what in the name of sanity are you *grinning* about?"

"You forget one thing, Pete," Carey said happily, some of the

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color returning to his cheeks. "As long as I can think of all the possibilities, and figure they're probably due to happen to me, I *won't* go nuts. What's there to *scare* me? As long as I *expect* something horrible to happen, it *won't*, see? Do you realize that for the next five days, I can be *careless* with my life?"

"Oh, just a minute, boy, that's dangerous, thinking that way." McCleod said, scowling. "You'll walk blithely into the front of a burning ammunition dump, or something. My advice to you is to let me get you admitted to a nice rest home for the remainder of your death-week, and—"

"And on the first night I break my neck falling out of bed! No thanks, Pete. I think my way's better. Hell, this is the opportunity of a lifetime, for a reporter! I can get away with *anything* for these next five days, don't you see?"

Carey was on his feet and headed for the door. McCleod, after a fractional second of indecision, slid open the top drawer of his desk and took out a pistol. *"Carey!"* he said loudly.

Carey turned around, saw the gun, and laughed. "Ah-ah," he shook his head. "Shouldn't have told me. Now I'll be expecting it!"

"Look, Carey," McCleod's face was pained, "I hate to resort to this, but you're not well. You need medical care— Damn it, keep back, will you!" he said, angrily, as Carey advanced upon him with a nonchalant grin.

"You wouldn't use that on me, Pete," Carey said, taking the gun from McCleod's fingers without any trouble whatsoever. "You're only bluffing. But *I'd* use it on me, because I'm *expecting* it to blow my brains out."

With that, Carey placed the muzzle against his right temple and jerked the trigger three times. The gun clicked harmlessly, and he tossed it down on McCleod's desktop. "See?" he said.

"W-What the hell—?" said McCleod, picking it up. He pointed it at the wall and tugged the trigger. The muzzle spurted flame and there was a loud *Blam!* as the bullet tore a black hole in the pastel plaster of the wall. McCleod swore. "The *Safety* was on!"

"Be seeing you, Pete," said Carey, and he turned and left the office, passing the startled receptionist, about to enter to find the source of the gunshot.

McCleod sat there for only a moment, then he was up and moving after Carey, fast. "Hold it, buddy," he said, in the outer office. "This may make medical history. The least you can do is

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have a qualified eye-witness along." McCleod's receptionist just stared.

"And again," grinned Carey, "if it *doesn't*, I'll *need* a medic!"

"You know," said McCleod, sipping at his highball, "it's beginning to make sense, Carey."

They were in a booth in a small plush bar, in the downtown area that housed both their places of business, on their fourth round of drinks. Carey's face was flushed and happy.

"Sure it does," he said, a little fuzzily. "Like what you were saying, about all the funny little things that can go phfft and knock people off. Why *don't* they, then, more often-like? I'll tell you why. Because the *aura's* working, that's why they don't."

"That protective aura the girl mentioned?" McCleod asked.

"Uh-huh," Carey nodded. "It figures, don't it— Doesn't it, I mean? Like you said, how come *everybody* isn't lying around dead, with all the gizmos that can go out of whack?"

"I dunno," said McCleod, adding for clarity, "I dunno at all."

"Why don't we—" Carey said, then paused to drain his glass, the icecubes bumping him on the nose. He waved at the waiter for another one, then turned his bleary eyes back to McCleod's. "Why don't we *prove* it, Pete?"

McCleod focussed his eyes on Carey's face with an effort, and said, scowling mightily, "Why don't we prove what?"

"That it's bunk, all of it. Dying, I mean. You gotta be *touched*, see? Otherwise the *aura* keeps you okay, right?"

"I—I guess so," McCleod said, uncertainly. "But whatta ya mean, *prove* it? Whadda we *do?*"

"We endangerize me, see?" Carey said, his eyes aglow. "And every time nothin' happens, you —you write it down, see? And all at once, we're rish—" He ran his tongue between upper teeth and lip. "—*rich*. See?"

"How?"

"How what?"

"Rish?"

"Uh— We *sell* the story to the paper."

"They won't believe it . . . Will they?"

"*Sure* they will, on—on accounta I can *prove* it's th'truth."

"Oh, yeah," McCleod nodded. Then, "*How'll* you prove it?"

"By being *'live!*" Carey grinned. "See?"

"S'a wonderful plan!" McCleod nodded, looking up and blinking as the waiter brought the fresh round of drinks and took the empty glasses away. "Wonderful," he repeated. "Well, here's to ya."

"Yeah."

They clicked glasses, drained the contents, and left the bar, walking steadily, maybe a little

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too steadily, out into the warm October night. The street outside was more or less deserted, the nearest people being at a distant corner.

"Where to?" said McCleod, swaying a bit as they came to a sudden standstill at the curb.

"To danger," said Carey. A fire, or a holdup, or—"

"I don't see any fire, nowheres," McCleod complained, bitterly.

"We could start one—" Carey said brightly, then frowned. "But someone *else* might get hurt, only."

"Yeah," McCleod agreed. "Yeah. What *we* need . . . What we really *need*, my friend, is a *singular*-type danger, for you only."

"Swell! . . . What?" said Carey.

"Well— I could push you down a manhole," McCleod offered.

"Nope. You can't."

"Why not?"

"On accounta *you* gotta be writin' everything *down*, see?

"Uh— Oh, year, I forgot. Okay, *what*, then?"

Carey crinkled up his forehead in a massive scowl, and thought very hard. Then he grinned, like a small boy. "Th' zoo! We let ourselves into the lion-s cage at th' *zoo!*"

"Hey, that's a wonderful— *We?*" McCleod croaked, abruptly.

"You gotta write it down, don'tcha?" Carey insisted.

McCleod thought it over. "I can write better *outside* the cage," he said suddenly.

"How do ya know? Ever *tried* inside?"

"Mmmm— No. It's—It's just a *feeling* I have, is all."

Carey shrugged. "Okay . . . But stand close, so you don't *miss* nothing— *Hey! Cab!*"

In the cab beside his friend, who was breathing deeply and nasally, almost asleep with the alcohol in his system, McCleod leaned back and let the cool breeze through the half-open window fan some of the fever from his cheek. A certain consciousness of incongruity in his and his companion's behavior was becoming apparent to him as they rode, and he found himself bothered by it. His partial stupor had all but vanished during the ride.

"Carey . . ." he said, suddenly leaning forward, the better to turn his head and face his friend, "I wonder if we're behaving quite rationally?"

Carey's lashes fluttered, and he blinked himself to alertness. "How do you mean, Pete?" he said, squinting in a vain attempt to discern the other's features in the intermittent light that fell within the vehicle from passing streetlamps. "We're not drunk,

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if that's what you mean. Just a little woozy, maybe . . ."

"Exactly," McCleod nodded, worried. "I feel like a pawn in a colossal chess game, all at once. I'm a doctor, Carey, and supposed by most people to be more than normally rational, yet instead of sending for the police when you fled from my office, I came along *with* you. And now, I realize I've agreed to help you into the lion's cage at the zoo! It can't be the drinks; I've had lots more than that and remained quite clear-headed. There's something else."

"What?" Carey said, much of the furry sibilance leaving his tongue. "You don't think we're playing into their hands, maybe?"

"I don't know," said McCleod, sincerely. "But I know that what we're setting out to do is insane."

Carey ran his tongue over dry lips, and considered. "Pete— You're right! It *is* nuts, tempting fate this way. I wonder— I wonder if my aura's come back?"

"What a strange thing to say," McCleod remarked. "I was just thinking along the same lines. Look, Carey, what can this aura possibly *be*, anyhow? If it's a form of caution, and her touch removed it, it certainly explains your behavior up till now; yet she warned you that death would come from a quarter where you least expected it— Suppose that *that* was your undoing, in itself?"

"I don't get you, Pete?" Carey said slowly.

"I mean that by telling you it would be *un*expected, you did not therefore fear death in *expected* places. In that way, you might just be ripped to shreds by a lion that you weren't expecting to be a menace!"

Carey turned pale. "But that's— That's horrible, Pete! If I can't expect death in the normal danger-places, or even expect it in the normally *safe* places, then it can come from anywhere, can't it!" He began to mumble fearfully to himself.

"Yes," McCleod said somberly. "It can . . . *Still* don't like the idea of the rest home, Carey?"

Carey swallowed with difficulty, then sank back against the cushion. "Better give the driver the address, Pete."

"Yes. Yes, I think I'd better." McCleod leaned forward and gave the driver the new destination, then sat back beside his companion. "If that touch simply removes normal caution, then it seems to me that all you have to do is exercise *abnormal* caution about your life. You'll probably seem like an advanced case of hypochondria to the staff at the home, but don't let it bother you.

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Be fussy about everything, as much as you like. You won't end up very popular, but you'll end up alive, which is more important."

"I won't even get into a wheelchair without airbrakes," Carey said, jokingly. But neither of them laughed.

On the fifth and last day, Carey was lying between the fresh white sheets of his bed, thumbing idly through a magazine, when he heard the door close. He looked up, assuming it was the nurse, then let the magazine drop from his fingers.

"How did *you* get in here?" he said, his body numb with dread.

The girl smiled. "We have our ways," she said softly.

He noticed with an increase of panic that she was brightly blonde, now, even more lovely than when he'd first met her. "I see you're still employed," he said carefully.

"They were very nice about it," she admitted. "They allow a certain margin for ineptness among beginners. I'm to be let rectify my error."

"H-how?" Carey said, eyeing her warily as she moved closer to the bedside, her feet soundless on the polished tile floor. "What are you going to do?"

"Touch you again," she said. "It will bring your aura back. And then you can be assured of bodily safety for the next four months."

"What if I died now? It'd upset their schedule or something?"

She nodded. "You see, you're needed alive, for a time. Your life will contact and cross other lives during the period remaining to you, and without your influence upon them, a great many *other* schedules would be upset, which in turn—"

"I get it," Carey said sullenly. "My early death would yank the plug on the dike, huh? Well, what about my stay *here?* I've been out of contact with 'other lives' for five days, now. I'd imagine all hell was breaking loose without me."

She shook her head, her long hair swirling and glistening in the sunlight. "No, you would have been here anyhow. The sight of that woman's death would have sent you here, since you'd have realized you were on the wrong bus and have been getting off just behind her. The thought that it might almost have been *you* who were run down would have occasioned a slight nervous collapse, much the same as you had for different reasons."

"So where did they goof, then?" Carey said, puzzled.

"It was my fault. They hadn't expected me to stay on the bus after contacting the woman,

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hence they did not tally the probability of my meeting you four months early . . . Here, now, I haven't much time. Hold out your hand."

"No," said Carey, putting both hands beneath the sheet and pulling it halfway onto his chin, preparatory to covering his face if she made a grab in that direction. "I'm not going to die now, nor later, if I can help it. Scram, will you!? Please go out of my life and leave it alone!" Suddenly remembering the signal cord pinned to the sheet near his head, he grabbed the slim plastic tube and pressed the button on its tip. "There! A nurse will be here in a few seconds. You'd better clear out."

The girl stared at him, and seemed to be trying to think.

"No, you don't!" he said harshly. "I know what you're on the brink of doing, but forget it! A quick dive at me won't help. I can jump the other way and race around the bed as long as you can, sister!"

His ears were straining for the efficient click of a nurse's white oxfords in the hall outside as he spoke. He could tell the girl was listening, too, as anxious as he was.

"You fool!" she said, "I'm offering you four months of *life!*"

"Don't play semantics with me," Carey spat. "All you're trying to do is guarantee my death! Well, I won't let you. And you can't let me die now, either, or it'll louse up your precious schedule!"

"The schedule has been altered before," she said, her voice flat and hopeless. "It can be again. If you insist on dying today, then I suppose I'll have to let you."

Carey felt a sudden pang. "Look, kid, I hate to bollix up your *job*, but this is my *life* I'm fighting for, remember?"

Her shoulders slumped. "I can't really say I blame you," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

"No hard feelings?" Carey said, hopefully.

She smiled, her face lighting up with foregiveness. "None," she said, and held out her hand.

Carey was within an inch of shaking it, a purely reflex action, when the door opened, and the floor nurse walked in. He yanked his extended fingers away as though they'd been burnt, and rage flooded his soul, as the girl's smile blossomed into a mocking laugh of near-triumph.

"Get out of here!" he roared. "Murderess! Leave me alone!"

The girl didn't move, but the floor nurse did, quickly. The door slammed behind her.

"What—?" said Carey, sitting up, bewildered.

"She can't see me," the girl smiled. "She thought you were

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talking to her. This means heavy sedation for you, possibly a straitjacket. You're listed with the dangerous cases, you know."

Carey came bolt upright on the bed. "You're nuts!" he said. "Pete knows why I'm here—"

"Your friend Doctor McCleod," the girl said, with a cunning smile, "thinks you're hopelessly insane. Or didn't you know that?"

"They can't do that to me!" Carey said, flipping aside the sheet and striding for the door in his pajamasfl "I won't be pinned into one of those canvas horrors. I can't stand being tied up, I—"

"I know," the girl said wearily. "As a child, you were bound by some playmates, and left tied to a tree in the park. You were there all night before your parents and the police found you. You haven't been able to bear being trussed up since then. You don't even wear a belt with your pants. In fact, your pajama bottoms are the type that snap shut, and have no drawstring . . ."

Carey was still staring at her when the nurse burst in the room with two brawny interns, and subdued him.

By eight that evening, the sedative had worn off, and he began to plead with the girl at his bedside to touch him. He was going mad in that jacket, with his arms lashed crosswise upon his chest. "All right, you've *won!*" he cried, piteously, while staff members passing in the hall shook their heads solemnly and didn't pause to look in on the man they believed was an incurable maniac.

"Give me the extra four months!" Carey pleaded, rolling violently back and forth on the bed, unable to go beyond the padded grip of the leather ankle-straps which bound his feet to the bedstead. "Go on, touch me, please, I can't stand this, I'm going crazy, you've got to let me out of here, you've got to, you've got to . . ."

"The schedule," said the girl, sadly, "has already been adjusted, to compensate for your early death, Mister Philips."

"Please, *please!*" he shrieked. "One touch, please! I can't *breathe* in this thing, it's choking me. It's on too tight!"

"Yes," the girl nodded. "It *is* on too tight. You *are* being choked to death."

"Touch me, touch me, *touch me!*" he raved.

At eleven-twenty that night, she finally touched him. But it was merely to close his cold eyelids over his fear-filled sightless eyes.

THE END

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DEGREE CANDIDATE

By PETER ARTHUR

Jav was ready to take the test.
And, all innocently unknowing,
several billions were due to
pass or fail with him.

"THE candidate may enter."

Jav tensed. Now that the time had come, he felt uneasy. Little was known of these special qualification councils. Successful candidates were sworn to secrecy. There might even be an investigator's report, and Jav's conscience was not clear, no matter how much he might rationalize the situation.

But this was no time to show any doubt; the examiners were waiting. Jav took comfort from the fact that his record as a brilliant, if somewhat erratic, student must be well known to the council. After all, it was on the basis of past performance that he had been given a free hand with a major project. Not many students as young as he were ever assigned a whole experimental unit for their research.

He permitted energy to flow in vibrant quanta through certain networks of his complex, multidimensional structure, and found himself in the audience chamber.

The examiners hovered there, thoughts perfectly shielded, some maintaining invisibility of the highest order, others content

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to be grossly tangible on a wide spectrum.

"The Candidate Jav, aspirant for a Class Three Degree." A junior examiner projected the thought, gem-like in its hard clarity.

A more authoritative pattern was formed: "The candidate will report on his project." The Chief Examiner had taken charge.

Jav deflected energy packets into vortices charged with his summary. Smoothly the specialized radiators released precise wave-lengths holding millions of information units. It was skillfully done, a vast amount of material expertly integrated, but the officials appeared unimpressed. Were they actually unfriendly, or merely blasé? Jav's uneasy conscience gave him no rest. There were iron laws binding experimenters; if you let them over-awe you, destroying your initiative, the project couldn't amount to much. Yet he had to satisfy their highly exacting demands within the framework of rigid ethical considerations. If he failed to do so, there would be no degree, and he might suffer the deep humiliation of a new, less difficult assignment. The old one would be turned over to a better student, or possibly abandoned altogether.

He stopped his sub-thoughts momentarily to check on the data-vortices. They were functioning perfectly. He sensed their fleeting aside: "—dependent upon the element oxygen. No such form of life has been studied before—." He tuned out. Next would come the claim that a Class Eleven Intelligence had been evolved by his methods. That was a critical point. Actually it was nearer to Class Thirteen, but he felt sure of getting away with the exaggeration. A check would require much time. As a matter of fact, if he had tended more strictly to business, even a Class Nine might have been reached. The creatures, when properly handled, were remarkably susceptible to improvement. Was it the oxygen? One more question he should have cleared up instead of—oh, well, the Council wasn't likely to check up. Too many candidates up for their degrees. He'd get back to real work, and with any luck, could soon have the facts in perfect accord with his official report.

Cautiously, with the utmost delicacy, Jav extended his sensory pattern until it brushed the Chief Examiner's aura, lightly as a shadow flickers over stone. His tautness eased. The Chief was not hostile. Unless, Jav reflected, he was deliberately modifying the shield. And surely no mere aspirant was important enough for that. If the Chief Ex-

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aminer *were* pleased, that coveted degree was practically his. The vortices were concluding: "—very effective environment . . . swift evolution . . . Eleventh Class in a single time-unit —" A few final thought-waves, neatly modulated, rippled free. The end of his report.

There was a moment's absence of all projection, then the Chief Examiner commanded: "Let the Investigator begin."

Jav shrank within himself, dimensionality blurred. So there *was* an investigator. It had been rumored that only a minute percentage of the experiments were ever checked—those of weaker students, normally. How carefully had this official probed? Perhaps he'd made only a routine, superficial survey. Maybe—

The first question flew lancelike into his being. "Candidate Jav, what is Rule Three of the Code?"

Was that merely a test of his knowledge, or direct accusation? How much did they really know? He remained calm, quoting glibly, without tapping any vortices for data stored formally: "Every manifestation of life, however simple, is entitled to freedom from all pain except that irreducible residue attendant on the metabolic processes themselves."

The swift counter shattered any illusions about the motive behind that first question.

"Do you deny inflicting upon the organisms of your project pain and suffering of the sort specifically barred by Rule Three?"

Jav's thought patterns quivered with erratic current surges. The answer came. "No; but such torment was necessary in order to determine the full potentialities of the creatures under investigation." He was instantly aware of the pulse of disapproval that flashed through the Council. Was everything lost? A direct lie would have been fatal. Better to try a justification. Maybe that's all they wanted, a bold defense—intellectual courage.

"Surely the candidate knows that no further data about life, even if so attainable, excuses such barbaric maltreatment of lower animals. And that more than enough facts were accumulated before adoption of the Code to prove that pain is never anything but a deterrent to the development of high life-forms. Why, then, did you revert to a class of experiments long since forbidden as cruel and fruitless?

"I was aware of the earlier researches, but not convinced they had exhausted so valuable a field." He groped for further arguments. "If I have erred," he declared boldly, "it was only through desire for knowledge, and not because I lacked com-

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passion for my primitive organisms."

"You pretend, then, that parasitic diseases, famine, and—ultimate horror—war, were allowed to rage among these miserable creatures only to improve our understanding of life?"

"I do." There was no hope now except to brazen it out. If he'd dreamed they were going to check so thoroughly . . .

"If that was so," the Investigator went on relentlessly, "what was the purpose—" here the thought was charged with searing scorn—"of appearing in various physical guises on the very mud-daub of the experimental area? Why, Candidate Jav, did you degrade yourself to play Personal God to these pitiful animals? Why did you match one group against the other, accepting, even soliciting their primitive, superstitious 'worship'? Was it for knowledge, or because you enjoyed the role? Speak!"

Jav remained miserably thought-less, currents clashing aimlessly about the vortices.

The Investigator continued. "What of the Crusades? The Thirty Years' War? The Black Death? Dachau? The ghosts, witches, vampires—odd creations of your leisure moments. All for knowledge, no doubt!"

It was all over; Jav didn't reply. Why *had* he used those animals for daliance, amusement? Was it because even in their brutishness, they had just enough godliness to excite his resentment? No, not that, surely. It was their reactions, their absurd illogic that had tempted him. Their weird behavior was so fascinating, he had simply lost sight of his original goals. They reminded him of a mathematics theorem which gives back something different, unexpected—more than you put into it, so to speak. They spoke all together in acceptance of a particular belief; but when you raided their pitiful minds, you found delightful contradictions. Like the time he'd been all those silly, too-human Greek Gods. The idiots would promise Zeus an ox, and gleefully hoodwink him with some burned entrails, while eating the good meat themselves. Accept a being as all-powerful, then stupidly believe you could outwit him in such a childish way.

And, after all, most of the cruelty was theirs, not his. He had merely stirred up certain innate tendencies. But then he had made them as they were, or, at least, failed to guide their evolution properly. Well, it was too late now. He should have followed the Code. Ironically enough, now that he could never return, he felt a sudden perverse affection for the filthy, quarrelsome, treacherous, brutal, and

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stupid organisms he had created so casually. He could even recall instances of courage and faith that were touching. Take Daniel, for example. Those lions couldn't scare him. Or that young girl—a child—who had allowed herself to be tortured to death rather than confess falsely that she was a witch. Older, stronger men and women had submitted. . . . Then there was Newton, Shakespeare, Beethoven. Pity, the way things were turning out.

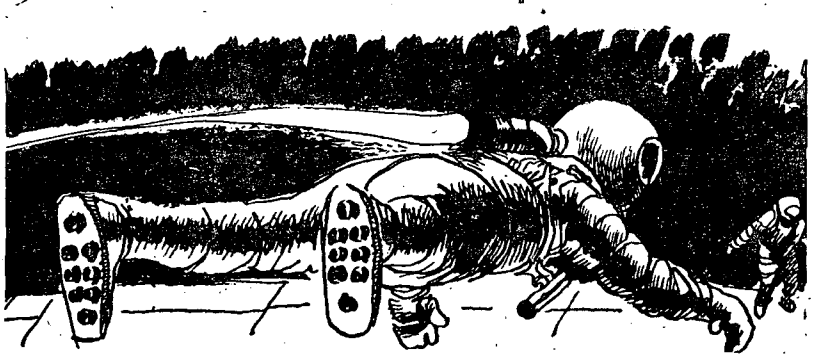
The Investigator attacked again. "Were you not also guilty, in a fit of irrational annoyance, of destroying the whole experiment by means of a flood? Why wasn't that reported officially, as the Code prescribes?"

Jav dropped all defense in a plea for mercy. If they would only let him, he would instantly ameliorate the creatures' lot. He would soften their harsh environment, prevent nuclear wars, teach them love and forbearance, raise their brutish souls to the stars. His wave pattern, no longer well modulated, vibrated wildly. He would—

The Chief Examiner broke in coldly. "It is too late. The candidate is failed. In addition he is barred forever from further work towards the degree. His plea for rehabilitation of these unfortunate primitives is herewith denied, since such a program would inevitably entail excessive suffering after so much damage. Surely these creatures deserve our crowning mercy, late though it is." He sent out a peremptory call: "Ga'r'el!"

"I await your commands, Chief Examiner."

"Go immediately to the Galaxy of Experiment. Project 45-R-16 is on Planet III of Solar Model 4,788,653,229. See that every trace of life is destroyed instantly, without pain. Wipe the surface clean. This Council is adjourned." THE END



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DR. BLACKADDER'S CLIENTS

By ARTHUR PORGES

Problem-solvers attract the strangest clients. Yet none, perhaps, were half so strange as the problem-solver himself.

Illustrator
BERNKLAU

THE advertisement, which had been appearing daily for some weeks, was brief and cryptic:

DO YOU HAVE AN INSOLUBLE PROBLEM?
Box 511 for appointment.

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At first the only nibbles came from some reporters associated with the city's newspapers. They left with the impression that Doctor Blackadder was poor copy, being merely a consultant in "human relations," no better nor worse than most of the class, endemic in large numbers to Los Angeles.

At least six of the people who sought the doctor's aid would not have agreed.

THE FIRST CLIENT

was a plump, sullen-faced young man. Dr. Blackadder had no difficulty in classifying him as the owner of a king-size persecution complex. As for his problem, it was tricky without being very important, a distinction quite familiar to the experienced consultant.

It was significant that the client had no hesitation in presenting so trivial a difficulty for resolution; obviously, it had become extremely important to him. Which accounts, perhaps, for the doctor's willingness to solve it.

"The whole point is right in that damned saying, proverb, or whatever you call it," the young man said, after a brief sketch of his background. "My father is a sour old tyrant—a self-made brute—who never gave me any encouragement. He hates books, poetry, and music—all he cares about are 'practical' things. For

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years he's claimed I was nothing but a soft, spoiled ne'er-do-well, just because I want to make my own career in the arts. He constantly repeats that fool adage from some bog in Ireland, and I'm fed up to my back teeth. He says: 'You can no more be changed into a worthwhile man than the curl can be taken out of a pig's tail.' I've heard that almost every day since I was a kid; I just can't stand any more." He looked about the neat office, as if in search of some clue. You say you can help with insoluble problems, well that's mine—I mean it. Everybody maintains—especially the 'practical' people—that you can't get the curl out of a pig's tail—at least, while it's alive. If I could do that, the old spalpeen would have to pipe down, and our relationship would change for good. I'd have the guts to break away and take my chances. Now how about it?"

Dr. Blackadder replied without hesitation, although his sensitive mouth twitched briefly behind the carefully trimmed mustache.

"The ad doesn't say I solve problems," he corrected the client, "yet your inference is reasonable. In fact, I don't just help to solve problems which most people would consider hopeless; I clear them up completely, and at once. That's my business. Your predicament, while ostensibly piddling, is of psychological importance to you, and certainly of the right order of difficulty."

He stepped to a cabinet which stood by a huge metal safe, and opened it to display dozens of rows of little glass vials, each full of a colored powder or liquid. He ran one lean, sinewy finger across the alphabetical shelves to the letter "P", and announced cheerfully: "Here we are—'Pig, decurler for tail of.' "

Sounds like army supply talk," his client muttered ungraciously. Nevertheless he reached out an eager hand for the container. Then he paused, his expression darkening. "What's this going to cost me?"

"Only a dollar; the basic chemicals are very cheap, and I'm not in this business to get rich; it's merely a hobby of mine—solving problems that you people on earth consider impossible. Now you just mix that powder in a quart of warm water, get a good grip on your pig—a small one would be best—and hold its tail in the solution for one minute. From then on, that porker will have a tail as straight and stiff as a ruler."

Handing him a bill, the young man said, glowing with malicious anticipation: "Wait'll I push him in Pa's face! He'll never use *that* silly crack again!" He strode out, escorted by Dr. Blackadder,

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who smiled a benign farewell, after which he sat down to await

THE SECOND CLIENT

who was an elderly man with a sharp, wrinkled, but rosy face that seemed devoid of humor. Yet he stated his case with a wry irony that implied a keen sense of the ridiculous.

"I suspect I'm a fool to come here," he said grimly. "But there's something oddly intriguing about that ad of yours—probably the understatement, with nothing really promised. Besides, although there's no fool like an old one, I feel that even a sexagenarian is entitled to make an ass of himself occasionally."

Dr. Blackadder bowed slightly in appreciation of the sentimest, but said nothing, although his greenish eyes with their peculiar, almost vertical pupils, seemed to twinkle a little.

"The fact is," his visitor admitted sheepishly, "my problem is literally just that—a mathematical one. Do you—I'm inane to ask—know much mathematics?"

"What *I* know is not in question," the doctor said evenly. "My forte is merely supplying answers. Let us say I am always in touch with—ah—people who are not easy to—um—stump. However, as it happens, I am fairly familiar with most branches of science."

"Well," the other said, his tone mildly skeptical, "this is hardly the sort of problem to be casually cleared up. However, since I'm here . . . What I'm interested in is map coloring. It's a famous problem, which has never been solved. Specifically, it has been possible to color every known map on a flat surface by using not more than four shades, assuming, of course, that like colors may touch where two countries meet at a point. The regions must not have corridors, and naturally, the same four colors may be used repeatedly, as long as no two countries are colored alike along the boundary. Do you understand? No map has been made which needs more than four colors, but nobody has ever been able to *prove* that five will never be needed.

"Now I have devoted many years of my life to research on that problem, my contributions being second only to those of Franklin; and yet none of us has come close to a proof." He sighed, and gave the doctor a crooked smile. "There you have it; and since I can hardly expect a mere amateur to provide a solution to a problem which has baffled the best mathematicians in the world for a century or more, I shall leave as casually as I came. In fact, I really don't know why—"

"One moment," said Dr. Black-

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adder. He turned to a large file case on the other side of the safe, pulled out the second drawer, and began to riffle its contents. "Felt sure somebody would call for these eventually. Hm. Goldbach's Conjecture; Fermat's Last Theorem. Ah! Four Color Problem. Here we are. The solution, I notice, is rather involved, but no doubt you can follow it. As I recall, the third theorem is the key." He handed the gaping client a folder, and motioned to the desk. "Suppose you sit down there and make whatever notes are necessary. Naturally, I can't let you take the folder out of the office."

"B-but," the other stammered, his face flushed. "I don't really want to—to steal another man's work. I just hoped to satisfy my curiosity. When you've struggled with a thing for years, and fear you'll die without knowing—"

"I understand," the doctor cut in smoothly. "And for that the charge is only a dollar. If you want to submit the solution to a journal under your own name, I should have to ask seven. But there's no question of theft; the one who solved it has no desire for kudos—here."

But the mathematician hardly caught those last words. After thrusting a dollar upon Blackadder, he was tracing out, with trembling fingers, the jungle of symbols on the sheets. His incredulity soon changed to delight. "He's done it, all right: 'necessary and sufficient'! And not a step too much. But who—it's not like anybody's technique I'm familiar with—"

But the doctor pointedly ignored such implied questions. Urbanely he led the client to the door, where the man, almost incoherent in his delight, was finally persuaded to leave. He had just reached the elevator, when

THE THIRD CLIENT,

a young woman, smartly dressed and radiantly attractive came in. Blackadder looked at her with approval, awarding high marks for the well tailored suit, the perfect hose, the skilful make-up. Obviously a career girl. Like the others, she seemed doubtful of his qualifications, and yet moved, somehow, to test them. She plunged into conversation.

"This is absurd," she said, with a delightful, gurgling laugh. "You poor man. I can't imagine how you could possibly help with such an unreasonable request."

"Naturally," he agreed, smiling in turn. "If my clients saw a way out of their problems, they wouldn't consider them insoluble."

She gave him a mock curtsey. "I consider myself properly squelched. But you've also stuck your neck awfully far out. There-

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fore, I'll explain my weird demand and puncture that maddening self-confidence. But if you laugh at me, I'll—no, I can't blame you."

She clasped immaculately gloved hands into a straining knot, her face suddenly grave.

"Doctor, you're dealing with a perfectionist. I'm a musician—a pianist. I've loved the piano and played it ever since I was five—not, alas like Mozart, but well enough to win minor concert status. I've heard all the great artists of my day: Rubinstein, Horowitz, Gieseking—even Rachmaninoff. They're marvelous, but not up to my ideal on one major composition."

He leaned forward, obviously interested.

"Which is?"

"Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata. You know it?"

He nodded. "A magnificent work."

She rewarded him with a dazzling smile and continued with the explanation.

"The musicologists," the girl said, "have called it the most difficult and complex of his piano pieces. Many of them imply that it's long, diffuse, and tiresome—an experiment that failed; but I simply can't accept that viewpoint. I think that if a pianist had the proper technique—a titan's fingers plus a deep musical understanding — the Hammerklavier would stagger its critics. Schnabel did very well, interpretively, but his dynamics were inadequate." She gazed squarely into his eyes with her own, which were liquid brown. "That's my impossible problem Doctor—where and how can I hear that sonata played as I know the right pianist could do it?"

"That's a tall order," he said wryly. "An ideal can seldom be matched in the real universe. Would you settle, I wonder, for the best that ever *has* been done? Probably the finest performance of all time?"

The delicate oval of her face went white, and she straightened in the chair. "You're not serious! How could you possibly—?" She laughed a little uncertainly. "Well, I had that coming, so—"

"Don't be hasty," he said, with an undertone of amusement in his voice. "Please sit back and listen carefully."

He stepped to a low console of satiny wood, raised a small lid on the top, and reached in to make some adjustments. After a moment he moved back until his shoulders touched the wall at her left. He lifted an admonitory finger.

Music surged into the room. There was absolute fidelity, as if the piano stood inside the console. Hi Fi, stereo—the terms were wholly inadequate. And the

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soloist's playing was something the trained ear could hardly credit. The sheer technique made her gasp. Horowitz doing that Paganini Etude had always seemed the ultimate in sheer virtuosity; but this artist made that judgement appear naive. There was a soaring excitement about the whole performance that far transcended mere technique, however. She felt that the pianist had a freshness of approach, an individuality, that belonged to the golden youth of music.

When the slow movement, full of bitter sorrow, began, her eyes became moist, and she forgot everything around her, sitting there entranced. It wasn't until the final movement, with its colossal fugue, that she spared a single glance for the doctor. To her fleeting surprise, he appeared equally moved.

The music swept on in a crescendo of power that was like an avalanche on the keys. Yet she could hear each separate note of every chord in the ponderous bass, and no two were sounded without subtle and deliberate variations in the striking force. Then there were those fierce, incredible trills, so even and rhythmic in spite of essential dissonance. At the very climax of this musical storm came an episode of tranquil beauty, played with immense warmth and comprehension.

The last measures died away, and she turned to Blackadder with eyes that were softly luminous, but turned blankly inward, unseeing.

"Satisfied?" he inquired softly.

A little shudder swept her slight form. Then awareness returned to her pupils. In a voice that trembled, she asked: "Who? Where? When? But for God's sake, *who?*" Then almost in a whisper. "That's no commercial recording. I've heard the best stereo hi fi, but . . . could it be? I'm dreaming, but if Beethoven himself . . ."

He studied her with respect.

"No, but your perceptions, and the freedom of your imagination, are those of a true artist. You felt the towering genius of the soloist both as a pianist and as a musician. Only the instrument itself was inadequate originally; we had to correct that. His contemporaries were rather good judges, after all. That, my dear, was Franz Liszt, playing at a private concert for his friends."

He led her gently but firmly to the door, ignoring the plea in her gaze. "I've solved your problem: I can't do any more, except to hope that you become a better artist because of this experience. There will be no charge, since I enjoyed the music almost as much as you did."

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Her questions died unspoken. Somehow the doctor seemed able to satisfy his callers with one potent revelation. The door closed behind the girl, only to open a few minutes later for

THE FOURTH CLIENT,

who was an undersized man, almost dwarfish; timid-looking, vague, and apparently hag-ridden. He made a ludicrously cautious survey of the office as if to insure that there were no eavesdroppers. It took Dr. Blackadder some moments to bring him near the point of his visit, and even then he skirted it with digressions of small relevance.

"I've always wanted to murder my wife," the client finally admitted, the doctor having adroitly shrunk his circle of questions to a single terse, near-mathematical center.

"Even when you married her?"

"I never!" was the indignant reply. "She married *me*. When that woman wants something—" A shudder of repulsion shook his skinny body. "No, Doctor. I'm not ashamed—not a bit. She's a nasty fat harridan who was no good to anybody. 'O fat white woman whom nobody loves!'" he declaimed. "I'd have run away from her long ago, but she'd have followed me to the lowest sub-basement of Hell—and taken over the place! Not that she cares about me, but just to show who's boss.

"So there was nothing else I could do. But while killing somebody is easy, as a mere physical achievement, disposing of the remains is a real puzzler. "As you know," he went on a little pompously, "the human body is not readily destroyed. The woman's enormous, and I weigh ninety-two pounds stripped. I could not carry her to the car even if there were some safe place to dump the carcass. Oh, I've read up. Wilde's solution—that chemical business in 'Dorian Grey'—for example. All nonsense. You'd need a gigantic, acid proof vat, and gallons of the stuff. And R. Austin Freeman proved that quicklime actually preserves a body instead of consuming it. She's too damn fat to bury, even if I knew a good spot. You'd need a bulldozer. John Dickson Carr could probably figure some way to make a three hundred pound corpse vanish in a phone booth. He has a wonderful imagination, that man. But I don't think he sympathizes with murderers even when they have good reasons for killing, like me. I meant to wait until I had the problem solved before bumping her off, but when she tore up my first edition of 'A Study in Scarlet,' I went berserk. So you see, Doctor, unless you can help, I'm finished, and they'll gas me. I assure you Sir, every word is true; she had it coming. She drove me to it."

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"I never moralize," Blackadder told him calmly. "My business is to supply answers. As for disposing of a body, there's a standard method that is simple and infallible. The police will never find her—unless, if you will pardon a bad pun, they take 'ad astra' for their motto. That means," he added, seeing the little man's blank expression, 'to the stars.' "

He went to the big cupboard containing the chemicals, but this time reached into a deep drawer at the bottom. From it he took a shining metal cylinder with a bluntly rounded nose. It was the approximate size and shape of a portable fire extinguisher. At the bottom, off center, was a ring, a study, integral part of the case.

"This," he told the eager client, giving the bright metal an affectionate pat, "is our special Body Disposal Rocket, M-4. You need only fasten a good stout rope—or belt—about your wife's middle—" Here he saw the little man open his mouth as if to protest, and added quickly: "You needn't say it; of course, she has no middle."

"No more than an egg, Sir. She is the exact shape of an oblate spheroid."

"In that case, just be sure to wrap her in some sort of strong harness—ropes, or a canvas sack, perhaps. Then tie this rocket to it by means of the ring at the base. When you're ready to fire, point the nose at the sky and press this red button. Don't flinch; it starts out quite slowly at first. Just keep it aimed, and let it slide free when it will. If you can't drag or roll her outside, try to prop her part way out of the window. Make sure she'll pass through without snagging, though, or this little beauty will take the window and frame along. The jet is small, but keep clear of it. Would you prefer," he asked gravely, "to have her sail right out of the solar system, or circle about some planet—say Uranus—forever? It's up to you."

The client cogitated for a moment with furrowed brow. "Better shoot her way out," he said emphatically. "She has a nosy brother at Mt. Palomar, and if he sees the fat old thing spinning about in an orbit, he's bound to recognize her." He reached for the rocket. Blackadder made a last adjustment, handed it over, and said, "That'll be five dollars."

"I don't see how you do it," the other marvelled. "Believe me, Doctor, you're undercharging. You'll go broke sure at those prices. If you make a buck on a gadget like that, I'll eat it. As a manufacturer, I know." He handed Blackadder a bill,

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squeezed his fingers in a moist, fervent clasp, and scuttled out, brushing past

THE FIFTH CLIENT

who was a middle aged man with a candid, pleasant face. He, too, was rather diffident at first, but the doctor's unobtrusive magnetism soon had its effect.

Finally, flushing a little, he asked: "Did you ever hear of the 'Baker Street Irregulars'? They're a bunch of fellows who take the official position that Sherlock Homes and Dr. Watson were historical characters." There was an underlying plea in his voice to which Blackadder responded handsomely.

"Of course," he said. "I've read every issue of their delightful journal myself. In fact, I once protested that 'Watson was a Woman' travesty of Rex Stout's in a letter of my own.

The client beamed at him, obviously relieved.

"Then you must know about the tin box with all of Holmes' unpublished cases."

The doctor nodded, his eyes twinkling; he knew what was coming.

"Maybe I'm nuts to ask such a thing, but could you—would you tell me—what *was* 'the shocking affair of the Dutch steamship *Friesland*'?"

"Tsk," Blackadder chided him gently. "You students of the canon seem to have overlooked a valuable clue to that case. In 'The Lost World,' written by Watson's—uh—literary agent, Dr. Doyle, there is a very suggestive reference to that particular ship. It mentions that the log contains an account of their glimpsing Professor Challenger's pterodactyl escaping out to sea."

The client gulped. "You mean Holmes and Watson were involved with that prehistoric monster—?

"No matter; you shall read the original account of the case for yourself." This time he turned to a small bookcase behind the desk, just under a metal plate fixed in the wall. On the second shelf was a row of thin volumes—pamphlets, actually—bound in black morocco. He ran a well-manicured hand across the backs, saying in a low voice: "Giant Rat of Sumatra, Singular Affair of the Aluminium Crutch, Grice-Patersons on the island of Uffa—ah—*Friesland*."

At each of these titles the man had leaped half out of his chair, and now he reached greedily for the volume the doctor offered him.

"One word," Blackadder said quietly. "You may read this here, but only on condition that you tell no one. I'd have nothing but Irregulars after me if you talked. As the first, you're acceptable.

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Write a pastiche if you like, but not a word about this shelf or me —agreed?"

"Brother," was the reply in fervent tones, "I'd agree to a lot more than that. Gimme!"

An ecstatic silence fell over the office, broken only by the rustle of stiff pages. Half an hour later, looking as contented as a kitten full of whipping cream, the man gave Dr. Blackadder two dollars, and left. Like most of the doctor's clients, he didn't ask for more. This was not true, however, of

THE SIXTH CLIENT

who came uninvited. By his own admission, Dr. Blackadder was no moralist, but there were limits.

A few minutes earlier he had heard the sound of gunfire not far away, and then the wail of police-car sirens. But certainly he had not expected that "Rocky" Pinola would choose his office for a refuge. Before he knew what was happening, two men had crashed in, slamming the door behind. The doctor opened his mouth to protest this rude entrance, only to find himself looking down the muzzle of a snub-nosed .38 automatic.

"Quick!" the tall gunman snapped, breathing heavily. "Where can I hide?"

Dr. Blackadder's face remained woodenly disdainful.

"You heard him," the smaller man said in a chill whisper. "When the Boss asks you a question, be smart and answer real polite."

"Shut up," Rocky ordered him brutally. "Hear that? They went by the building—never saw us turn in. We got time now, before they try here. We'll have a little talk with this nice man."

"I infer," the doctor said coolly, "that you are the criminals involved in that shooting a few minutes ago."

"See, the man's not only nice, he's got brains," Rocky said. "That's a hundred per cent right, fella. I'm hot—awful hot. I shot a little wild and hit some kids. That makes me very hot. People object to kids getting shot, but they couldn't expect me to stand there and be a clay pigeon for the cops."

"You got a real problem now," his companion said gloomily. "There ain't a hideout left in this state for a guy as hot as you, Rocky. Plugging that sergeant was bad enough, but those little girls—"

"I told you to knock it off," the tall man gritted. "If you hadn't bungled the arrangenents . . ." He took a postcard from the doctor's desk, doing it very cautiously with the gun steady. He stepped back and ran his eyes over the writing. A mirthless chuckle came from his thin

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lips. "What do you know, Gus—we sure came to the right place. The Doctor here—yeah, he's a doc, all right—makes a business of solving problems. A regular Mr. Anthony."

"Boss," the other man urged, "the cops will get to this building any minute now. You know how they close in."

"Sure. They had the whole block surrounded right after the shooting. And you said the bank was a pushover. For two cents I'd—only a matter of time until they're up here. But I see just where the doc can help me out. Listen good, Doc, because you'd better get this right. You're going to open that big safe of yours, and I'm hiding inside, with the door almost closed. The cops got nothing on Gus; he's just here from the East; they don't know him. Well, Gus is going to sit here like he was after advice, see? But he'll have a gun in his pocket, and if you make one little peep to the cops, he'll blow you apart. He ain't very bright, but he does just what he's told and never worries about afterwards."

"I sure will blast him, Rocky," Gus said. "But," he added in a hurt voice, "you hadn't oughta call me dumb."

With a half smile on his lips, the doctor gave a shrug, grasped a knob on the safe, and swung the massive door wide.

"Not even locked; how d'ya like that?" Rocky grunted. "That ain't so smart. Some bad guys might wander in here and clean you out. He gave a harsh cackle and peered. "Empty, by God. Say, I get it; part of the show, Doc—a big front for the suckers. I said you had brains. The doc's almost one of us!"

They heard heavy shoes clatter on the stairs, and with a wolfish grin, Rocky ducked into the safe, which was six feet high, and not unlike a metal, windowless telephone booth, except for the dials on the door.

"Remember," Gus warned, patting one pocket. "Talk like I'm getting advice."

"Very well," the doctor said placidly. "You are a typical paranoid, Mr.—ah—Howard. And your boss—he's even worse, and very fond of money, especially other people's."

Gus looked puzzled. Then he grinned cunningly. "Yeah; he's the best bank robber on the Coast. Never touches anything else. Today was the third this month. Over eighty-five grand —" He broke off as there were footsteps in the corridor.

"Yes, Mr. Howard," Blackadder said loudly, "an I. Q. of sixty is definitely inadequate, but—"

There was a loud, impatient rap on the door, and the police

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swarmed in, guns at the ready. They proceeded to question the doctor, who denied any knowledge of the escaped killers. He explained pleasantly that this gentleman, Mr. William Howard, was here for a consultation. Yes, they'd been talking for an hour. No, Lieutenant; nobody's been near us. No commotion in the building. A moment later the police left.

It was then, with a sharp thrust of one elbow, that the doctor closed the heavy, dial-studded door. It locked with a click, and they heard a muffled howl of fury from inside.

Gus sprang up, pulling the gun from his pocket. His narrow face was white with rage, lips drawn back over small, glittering teeth.

"That wasn't smart, Doc. Not a bit. You'll get something for that. Open it up, quick!" The automatic came level, and Gus' pale eyes sparkled like crumbs of glass.

"Don't worry," Dr. Blackadder soothed him. "He can breathe. You see, that's not actually a safe."

"Let him out, I tell you," the other ordered in a near whisper.

"The problem of the armed, paranoid client," the doctor said. "And my solution." His foot made an almost imperceptible motion; there was a deep hum, and the gun leaped from Gus' grasp to crash against the metal plate on the wall above the bookcase. Cloth ripped, and an assortment of keys and other steel objects from the criminal's pockets joined the weapon. Simultaneously a smaller automatic appeared in the doctor's right hand.

"Mine," he said genially, "is non-magnetic." He turned off the current, and the wall plate dropped its collection to the floor. There was a long impassioned yell from inside the metal box, followed by a stream of blasphemous threats. "I wouldn't move if I were you," Blackadder advised Gus in a frigid voice, holding the gun steady. Standing edgewise to the safe, one eye on his restive prisoner, he began to adjust some dials, working with slow precision over the verniers.

"This," he told the pale, unhappy satellite, "is actually a teleporter. I am about to solve Rocky's problem."

"What problem?" Gus demanded, sullenly uncomprehending.

The doctor pressed a small stud, and there was a pulsing whine from the tall metal box. Instantly the cries and hammerings inside were cut off. Gus looked puzzled.

"He said—or was it you?—that he was too hot for any place in this state; that the police would surely hunt him out. Well,

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they won't now." He gestured to the door. "You can go; you're not my problem. Without the Boss, you're too stupid to run free for long. I wasn't joking about that I. Q. of sixty, you know."

Gus stubbornly in his place. "You gonna turn Rocky over to the cops?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. This machine has already sent him away to a safe hide-out. See?" He twirled the knob, and opened the door. Gus gave a choked cry.

"He's gone—the Boss is gone!" A note of incredulous horror entered his voice. "Where'd you send him? Where's Rocky?"

Dr. Blackadder smiled.

"He is, now inside the big, hollow cornerstone of the Bank of America. It's rather a tight fit, and the Parole Board doesn't meet there, but that won't bother him long, because there's not much air, either. And, after all, he *likes* banks and money—you said so yourself." The doctor waved to the office door. "Now you'd better go; I'm expecting another client soon. No, wait," he added sharply, as the dazed Gus turned away. "I almost forgot—you owe me three dollars."

"Wha-what for?" the other gulped.

"Why, my fee of course, for solving Rocky's problem. Hand it over."

Wild-eyed, Gus clawed some bills out of his pocket, and fled.

The doctor sighed. He sat down to wait for his next client.

THE END

EDITORIAL

(continued from page 5)

Dr. Dyson even has an idea of what kind of life would exist within the huge shells. Beings, he speculated, might exist on small planetary objects, a mile or so in diameter, enclosed in an atmosphere-tight skin. Swarms of these bodies would orbit within the shell.

Well, none of us writing or reading this will be around when the Dyson Theory is proved or disproved, most likely. So, you might say, why worry? Well, think of the poor fellow who picks up his morning paper and reads this sort of thing just before he is about to sit down and knock out a story for FANTASTIC!—NL

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SYNOPSIS

As a result of a chance conversation with a Betelguesan spacer, Capt. Dominic Flandry, of the Field Division, Intelligence Corps, Terran Imperial Navy—otherwise known as counterspy—drops in on the isolated planet of Unan Besar. Unan Besar, anciently colonized by earthmen, has for centuries isolated itself from instellar life. When Flandry arrives he is surlily greeted by chunky Nias Warouw, director of the Guard Corps of Planetary Biocontrol. Flandry soon learns that the planet's air is poisonous to humans—a germ reacts with human enzymes to form deadly acetylcholine—and the sole antitoxin is controlled by Biocontrol. To live one must take a pill every 30 days. The pills are rigidly controlled, rigidly distributed at exorbitant prices. Result: Biocontrol controls Unan Besar by the threat of withholding antitoxin and allowing one to die in agony.

In Biocontrol's headquarters in the capital. Kompong Timur, Flandry is questioned. Threatened with mindprobe, he escapes by jumping out of a window into one of the canals that lace the city. He evades police and water beasts sent to pursue him, and finds a precarious refuge in the underworld area of the city—in the slum hideaway of the giant bandit, Kemul, and the beautiful Luang, who earns her

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A Plague of Masters

By POUL ANDERSON

Illustrator BERNKLAU

(Conclusion)

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living by her wits and her antitoxin pills with her body. Flandry wins their confidence, holds out the promise of overthrowing Biocontrol by introducing cheap and plentiful antitoxin if they will help him escape the planet to an Imperial planet, where scientists can synthesize the pill.

They test Flandry by forcing him to raise money for his own dose of antitoxin. Flandry fleeces a local crook, comes back with riches. Kemul and Luang decide to hide Flandry in another town until Biocontrol gives up its search for him. That night Flandry and Luang learn to love each other.

VIII

TWO THOUSAND kilometers north of Kompong Timur, a mountain range heaved itself skyward. It was dominated by Gunung Utara, which was also a city.

The morning after he arrived, Flandry stepped out on the ledge fronting his hostel. Behind him, a tunnel ran into black basalt, looping and twisting and branching, for it was an ancient fumarole. Rooms had been excavated along that corridor; airblowers and fluorescent tubes had been installed; plastisurfacing and tapestries softened bare rock. Most of the city was built into such natural burrows, supplemented with artificial caves—up and down the slopes of Gunung Utara.

Flandry could just see the cliff behind him, and about ten meters downward where the ledge tumbled below his feet. Otherwise his world was thick white mist. It distorted sounds; he heard machines and voices as if from far away and from impossible directions. The air was thin and cool, his breath smoked. He shivered and drew tighter about him the hooded cloak which local people added to kilt, stockings, and shirt. After all, they lived a good 2500 meters above sea level.

There was a rumbling underfoot, deeper than any engine, and the ground quivered a little. Gunung Utara dreamed.

Flandry lit an atrocious native cigaret. Luang had promptly sold all his Terran supply. Presently he would go look for some breakfast. Food in the lowlands had been heavy on rice and fish, but Luang said meat was cheaper in the mountains. Bacon and eggs? No, that would be too much to hope for. Flandry sighed.

It had been a pleasant trip here, though. Extremely pleasant, on admirably frequent occasions. The girl had not merely sent him off to hide, but come along herself, with Kemul at heel. They had been ferried across the

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lake at night by someone who would keep his mouth shut. At the depot on the far side, she engaged a private cabin on one of the motorized rafts which plied the Ukong River. He stayed inside that, and she spent most of her time with him, while the raft chugged them slowly northeast to Muarabeliti. (Kemul slept outside the door, and said little in waking hours, spending most of his time with a marijuana pipe.) There they could have gotten an airliner, but since that was only for the wealthy, it seemed safer to go by monorail. Not that they jammed themselves into a third-class car like ordinary peasants; they got a compartment, suitable conveyance for petty bourgeoisie. Across a continent of jungle, plantation, and drowned lowland, Flandry had once more paid less attention to the scenery than a dutiful tourist should. And now they were holed up in Gunung Utara until the heat went off, with Biocontrol certain that Flandry must be dead.

And then?

He heard the lightest clack of shoes on stone and turned around. Luang emerged from the tunnel. She had yielded to this climate with a flame-red tunic and purple tights, but the effect was still remarkable, even before breakfast. "You should have called me, Dominic," she said. "I rapped on Kemul's door, but he is still snoring." She yawned, curving her back and raising small fists into the fog. "This is no town for long naps. Here men work hard and wealth flows quickly. It has grown much since I visited it last, and that was only a few years ago. Let me get well established, and I can hope to earn—"

"Oh, no, you don't!" Somewhat to his own astonishment, Flandry discovered that he retained a few absurd prejudices. "Not while we're partners."

She laughed, deep in her throat, and took his arm. It was not a very gentle gesture, though. She was curt and fierce with him, and would never say much about herself. "As you wish. But what then shall we do?"

"Live quietly. We've more than enough funds."

She let him go and snatched a cigaret out of a pocket. "Bah! Gunung Utara is rich, I tell you! Lead, silver, gems, I know not what else. Even a common miner may go prospecting and gain a fortune. It's soon taken from him. I want to do some of the taking."

"Is it quite safe for me to show myself?" he asked cautiously.

She looked at him. With his beard still inhibited, he needed only to shave his upper lip each day. Dye had blackened his hair,

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whose shortness he explained to the curious as due a bout of jungle fungus, and contact lenses made his eyes brown. The harsh sunlight had already done the same for his skin. There remained his height and the un-Pulaoic cast of his face, but enough caucasoid genes floated around in the population that such features, though rare, were not freakish. "Yes," she said, "if you remember that you are from across the ocean."

"Well, the chance must be taken, I suppose, if you insist on improving the shining hour with racketeering." Flandry sneezed. "But why did we have to come here, of all drizzly places?"

"I told you a dozen times, fool. This is a mining town. New men arrive each day from all over the planet. No one notices a stranger." Luang drew smoke into her lungs, as if to force out the mist. "I like not the god-hated climate myself, but it can't be helped."

"Oh, right-o." Flandry glanced up. A light spot showed in the east, where sun and wind were breaking the mists. A warm planet like Unan Besar could expect strong moist updrafts, which would condense into heavy clouds at some fairly constant altitude. Hereabouts, that was the altitude at which the mines happened to lie. The area was as foggy as a politician's brain.

It seemed reckless to build a town right into a volcano. But Luang said Gunung Utara was nearly extinct. Smoldering moltenness deep underneath it provided a good energy source, and thus another reason for this settlement; but the crater rarely did more than growl and fume. It was unusually active at the present time. There was even a lava flow. But the same engineers whose geophysical studies proved there would never again be a serious eruption, had built channels for such outpourings.

As the fog lightened, Flandry could see the ledge below this one, and the head of a crazily steep trail which wound down past tunnel mouths. He caught a sulfurous whiff.

"We should find it interesting for a while," he said. "But what do we do afterward?"

"Go back to Kompong Timur, I suppose. Or anywhere else in the world that you think there may be a profit. Between us we will always do well."

"That's just it." He dropped his cigaret butt and ground it under his sandal. "Here I am, the man who can free your whole people from Biocontrol—I don't believe in false modesty, or even in true modesty—"

"Biocontrol never troubled me very much." Her tone grew sharp. "Under a new arrangement . . . oh, yes, I can easily foresee what an upheaval your

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cheap antitoxin would bring . . . would I survive?"

"You could prosper in any situation, my dear." Flandry's grin died away. "Until you get old."

"I don't expect to reach old age," she snapped, "but if I do, I'll have money hoarded to live on."

The clouds rifted, and one sunbeam dashed itself blindingly along the mountainside. Far down the slope, among ledges and crags and boulders, a rolling road was being installed to carry ore from a minehead to a refinery. Antlike at this distance, men crawled about moving rock by hand. Flandry had no binoculars, but he knew very well how gaunt those men were, how often they lost footing and went over a cliff, how their overseers walked among them with electric prods. But still the sunbeam raced downward, splitting the fog like a burning lance, until it touched the valley under the mountain. Impossibly green that valley was, green fire streaked with mist and streams, against the bare red and black rock which surrounded it. Down there, Flandry knew, lay rice paddies, where the wives and children of the construction gang stooped in the mud as wives and children had since the Stone Age. *Yet once upon a time, for a few generations, it wasn't done this way.*

He said, "The hand labor of illiterates is so cheap, thanks to your precious social system, that you're sliding back from the machine era. In another several centuries, left to yourselves, you'll propel your rafts with sweeps and pull your wagons with animals."

"You and I will be soundly asleep in our graves then, Dominic," said Luang. "Come, let's find a tea house and get some food."

"Given literacy," he persisted, "machines can work still cheaper. Faster, too. If Unan Besar was exposed to the outside universe, labor such as those poor devils are doing would be driven off the market in one lifetime."

She stamped her foot and flared: "I tell you, I don't care about them!"

"Please don't accuse me of altruism! I just want to get home. These aren't my people or my way of life . . . good God, I'd never find out who won this year's meteor ball pennant!" Flandry gave her a shrewd glance. "You know, you'd find a visit to some of the more advanced planets interesting. And profitable. D' you realize what a novelty you'd be, to a hundred jaded Terran nobles, any of whom could buy all Unan Besar for a yo-yo?"

Her eyes lit up momentarily. Then she laughed and shook her

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head. "Oh, no, Dominic! I see your bait and I won't take your hook. Remember, there is no way off this planet."

"Come, now. My own spaceship is probably still at the port, plus several left over from pioneering days, plus the occasional Betelgeusean visitor. A raid on the place—or, more elegantly, the theft of a ship—"

"And how long until you returned with a cargo of capsules?"

Flandry didn't answer. They had been through this argument before. She continued, jetting smoke between phrases like a slender dragon: "You told me it would take several days to reach Spica. Then you must get the ear of someone important, who must come investigate and satisfy himself you are right, and go back, and report to his superiors, who will wrangle a long time before authorizing the project. And you admitted it will take time, perhaps many days, to discover exactly what the antitoxin is and how to duplicate it. Then it must be produced in quantity, and loaded aboard ships, and brought here, and—Oh, by every howling hell, you idiot, what do you think Biocontrol will do meanwhile? They will destroy the vats the moment they know you have escaped. There is no reserve supply worth mentioning. No one here could hope to live more than a hundred of our days, unless he barricaded himself in a dispensary. Your precious Spicans would find a planetful of bones!"

"You could escape with me," he said, chiefly to test her reaction.

It was as he had hoped: "I don't care what happens to all these stupid people, but I won't be a party to murdering them!"

"I understand all that," he said hastily. "We've been over this ground often enough. But can't you see, Luang, I was only talking in general terms. I didn't mean anything as crude as an open breakaway. I'm sure I can find a way to slip off without Biocontrol suspecting a thing. Smuggle myself aboard a Betelgeusean ship, for instance."

"I've known Guards, some of whom have been on spaceport duty. They told me how carefully the Red Star folk are watched."

"Are you *sure* Biocontrol will pull the switch?"

"Sure enough. They can take a final dose of medicine and flee in the other ships."

"If those were sabotaged, though—?"

"Oh, not every man of them would ruin the world for sheer spite. Perhaps not even most. Especially if it meant their own deaths. But they all stand

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watches at the vats . . . and Dominic, all it needs is one fanatic, and there is more than one. No!" Luang discarded her cigaret and took his arm again, digging sharp nails into his flesh. "If ever I find you scheming any such lunacy, I will tell Kemul to break your neck. Now I am starving, and this is also the day when I should get my pill."

Flandry sighed.

He let her go first down the ladder to the trail. They walked precariously, unused to such steepness, and entered the crowds at lower levels. An engineer, in gaily embroidered tunic and the arrogance of a well-paid position, had a way cleared for him by two brawny miners. A yellow-robed priest walked slowly, counting his beads and droning a charm; from a cave mouth several meters above the path, a wrinkled wizard in astrological cloak made faces at him. A vendor cried his wares of fruit and rice, carried up from the valley at the ends of a yoke. A mother screamed and snatched her child from the unfenced edge of a precipice. Another woman squatted in a tunnel entrance and cooked over a tiny brazier. A third stood outside a jabbering joy cave and propositioned a gaping yokel from some jungle village. A smith sang invocations as he thrust a knife blade into the tempering solenoid. A rug seller sat in a booth and called his bargains to every passerby. High overhead, a bird of prey soared among the last ragged mists. Sunlight struck its wings and made them gold.

From a vantage point Flandry could see how the city came to an end and the raw mountain slope stretched northward: cinders, pinnacles, and congealed lava flows. Across a few kilometers of wasteland he spied a concrete dyke, banking the magma channel. Smoke hazed it, as the liquid rock oozed downward and froze. Above all tiers of city and all naked scaurs lifted the volcanic cone. The wind was blowing its vapors away, which was one thing to thank the lean cold wind for.

"Oh. This is the dispensary. I may as well get my medicine now."

Flandry stopped under the Biocontrol insigne. Actually, he knew, Luang had a couple of days' grace yet, but the law permitted that much overlap. He also knew she had illicit pills and didn't really need to buy her ration—but only a dead man could fail to do so without drawing the instant notice of the authorities. He accompanied her through the rock-hewn entrance.

The office beyond was small, luxuriously furnished in the low-legged cushions-and-matting

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style of Unan Besar. A door led to the living quarters which went along with this job; another door was built like a treasury vault's. Behind a desk sat a middle-aged man. He wore a white robe with an open hand pictured on the breast, and his pate was shaven; but the golden brand was not on his brow, for employees like him were not ordained members of Biocontrol.

"Ah." He smiled at Luang. Most men did. "*Good* day. I have not seen you before, gracious lady."

"My friend and I are newly arrived." With her to look at, Flandry didn't think the dispenser would notice him much. She counted ten silvers, the standard price, down on the table. The dispenser didn't check them for genuineness, as anyone else would have. If you passed bad money to Biocontrol, you'd be in trouble enough the next time! He activated a small electronic machine. Luang put her hands flat on a plate. The machine blinked and hummed, scanning them.

Flandry could imagine the system for himself. Her print pattern was flashed by radio to a central electronic file in Kompong Timur. In seconds the file identified her, confirmed that she was indeed ready for her ration, established that she was not wanted by the Guards, made the appropriate addition to her tape, and sent back its okay. As the machine buzzed, Luang removed her hands from it. The dispenser took her money and went to the vault, which scanned his own fingers and opened for him. He came back without the coins, the door closed again, he gave Luang a blue capsule.

"One moment, my dear, one moment. Allow me." He bustled over to fill a beaker with water. "There, now it will go down easier. Eh-h-h?" Flandry doubted if he was as attentive to the average citizen. At least, not judging from the way he used the opportunity to do a little pinching.

"Where are you staying in our city, gracious lady?" he beamed.

"For now, noble sir, at the Inn of the Nine Serpents." Luang was plainly unhappy at having to linger—but, equally plainly, you were never impolite to a dispenser. In law he had no rights over you. In practice, it was not unknown for a dispenser to block the signaller, so that GHQ never recorded a given visit, and then hand his personal enemy a capsule without contents.

"Ah, so. Not the best. Not the best. Not suitable at all for a damsel like yourself. I must think about recommending a better place for you. Perhaps we could talk it over sometime?"

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Luang fluttered her lashes. "You honor me, sir. Alas, business compels me to hurry off. But . . . perhaps, indeed, later—?" She left while he was still catching his breath.

Once outdoors, she spat. "Ugh! I'll want some anack in my tea, to get the taste out!"

"I should think you would be used to that sort of thing," said Flandry.

He meant it in all thoughtless innocence, but she hissed like an angry snake and jerked free of him. "What the blue deuce?" he exclaimed. She slipped into the crowd. In half a minute, he had lost sight of her.

IX

HE CHECKED his stride. Chattering brown people thronged by, forcing him off the trailstreet and onto a detritus slope. After some while, he realized he was staring past the stone wall which kept these rocks off terraces below, downward to an ore processing plant. Its stack drooled yellow smoke, as if ambitious to be a volcano too. Nothing about it merited Flandry's unbroken attention.

Well, he thought in a dull and remote fashion, *I still haven't had my breakfast.*

He began trudging over the scree, paralleling the trail but in no mood to go back and jostle his way along it. The downslope on the other side of the low wall became steeper as he went, until it was a cliff dropping fifty meters to the next level of dwellings. Stones scrunched underfoot. The mountain filled half his world with black massiveness, the other half was sky.

His first dismay—and, yes, he might as well admit it, his shock of pity for Luang and loneliness for himself—had receded enough for him to start calculating. Trouble was, he lacked data. If the girl had simply blown a gasket when he touched some unsuspected nerve, that was one thing. He might even use the reconciliation to advance his argument again, about escaping from Unan Besar. But if she had dropped him for good and all, he was in a bad situation. He couldn't guess if she had or not. A man thought he understood women, more or less, and then somebody like Luang showed up.

Of course, if the worst comes to the worst—but that's just what it's likely to do—

Hoy! What's this?

Flandry stopped. Another man had left the trail and was walking across the slope. A boy, rather: couldn't be more than sixteen, with so round a face and slender a body. He looked as if he hadn't eaten lately and had hocked everything but his kilt. Yet that was of shimmery vel-

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vety cloth, not cheap at all. Odd.

Something about his blind purposefulness jabbed understanding into Flandry. The Terran began to run. The boy sprang up on the wall. He stood there a moment, gazing into the wan sky of Unan Besar. Sunlight flooded across him. Then he jumped.

Flandry did a bellywhopper across the wall and caught an ankle. He almost went over too. "Oof!" he said, and lay draped with the boy squirming and swinging at the end of his arm. When his breath returned, he hauled his burden back over and dumped it on the ground. The boy gave one enormous shudder and passed out.

A crowd was gathering, quite agog. "All right," panted Flandry, "all right, the show's over. I thank you for your kind attention. Anyone who wishes to pass the hat is free to do so." A Guard shoved through. No mistaking that green kilt and medallion, the knife and club, or the built-in swagger.

"What's this?" he said, in the manner of policemen the universe over.

"Nothing," said Flandry. "The boy got a little reckless and nearly had an accident."

"So? Looked to me as if he jumped."

"Only a game. Boys," said Flandry with sparkling wit, "will be boys."

"If he's contracted or enslaved, suicide would be an evasion of obligations and attempted suicide would rate a flogging."

"No, he's free. I know him, Guardsman."

"Even a free man has no right to jump within city limits. He might have hit somebody underneath him. He'd have made a mess for someone to clean up, that's certain. Both of you come with me now, and we'll look into this."

Flandry's spine tingled. If he got himself arrested on so much as a malicious mopery charge, that was the end of the party. He smiled and reached inside his kilt pocket. "I swear it was only a near accident, Guardsman," he said. "And I'm a busy man." He extracted one of his purses. "I haven't time to argue this officially. Why don't you . . . ah . . . take ten silvers and go settle any claims there may be? It would be so much easier all around."

"What? Do you mean—"

"Quite right. The aggrieved parties ought to have at least two goldens between them. You know this city, Guardsman, and I'm a newcomer. You can find who deserves the payment. I beg you, do not burden my soul with debts I cannot settle." Flandry thrust the coins into his hand.

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"Ah. Ah, yes." The Guard nodded. "Yes, it would be best that way, wouldn't it? Seeing that no actual damage was done."

"I am always pleased to meet a man of discretion." Flandry bowed. The Guard bowed. They parted with murmurs of mutual esteem. The crowd lost interest and continued on its various ways. Flandry knelt beside the boy, who was coming to, and cradled the dark head in his arms.

"Take it easy, son," he advised.

"Oa-he, tuan, why did you stop me?" A shaken whisper. "Now I must nerve myself all over again."

"Ridiculous project," snorted Flandry. "Here, can you get up? Lean on me."

The boy staggered to his feet. Flandry supported him. "When was your last meal?" he inquired.

"I don't remember." The boy knuckled his eyes, like a small child.

"Well, I was on my way to breakfast, which by now is more like luncheon. Come join me."

The thin body stiffened. "A man of Ranau takes no beggar's wage."

"I'm not offering charity, you gruntbrain. I want to feed you so you can talk rationally, which is the only way I can learn whether you're the person I want to hire for a certain job."

Flandry looked away from the sudden, bitterly resisted tears. "Come!" he snapped. His guess had been right, the youngster was out of work and starving. A stranger to this area: obviously so, from the intricate foreign pattern of his batik and from his dialect. Well, an outlander might prove of some use to a stranded Imperialist.

A tea house wasn't far off. At this sunny time of day, most of its customers sat on a ledge outside, beneath giant red parasols, and looked down on a ravine full of clouds. Flandry and the boy took cushions at one table. "Tea, with a jug of arrack to lace it," Flandry told the waiter. "And two of your best rijstaffels."

"*Two*, sir?"

"To begin with, anyhow." Flandry offered the boy a cigaret. It was refused. "What's your name, younker?"

"Djuanda, son of Tembesi, who is chief ecologist on the Tree Where the Ketjils Nest, which is in Ranau." The head bowed above folded hands. "You are kind to a stranger, tuan."

"I'm one myself." Flandry lit his own tobacco and reached for his tea cup as it arrived. "From, ah, Pegunungan Gradjugang, across the Tindjil Ocean. Name's Dominic. I came here in hopes of my fortune."

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"Half the world does, I think." Djuanda slurped his tea in the approved Pulaoic manner. His voice had strengthened already, which underlined the anger in it. "So half the world are fools."

"Commoners have become rich men here, I am told."

"One in a million, perhaps . . . for a while . . . until he loses it to a cheat. But the rest? They rot their lungs in the mines, and their wives and children cough like amphibians in the rice paddies, and at the end they are so far in debt they must become slaves. Oh, tuan, the sun hates Gunung Utara!"

"What brought you, then?"

Djuanda sighed. "I thought the Trees of Ranau were not high enough."

"Eh?"

"I mean . . . it is a saying of my folk. A tree which grows too high will topple at last. Surulangun Ridge is the earth-buried bole of such a tree. It fell a thousand years ago, three hundred meters tall, and the forest still bears the scars of its falling, and the Ridge is still hot from its slow decay. The old people made a parable of it, and told us not to strive beyond reason. But I always thought—how splendid the great tree must have been while it lived!"

"So you ran away from home?"

Djuanda looked at the fists clenched in his lap. "Yes. I had a little money, from my share of our trade with outland merchants. It got me passage here. Tuan, believe I never scorned my folk. I only thought they were too stiff in their ways. Surely modern engineering skills could be of value to us. We might build better houses, for example. And we ought to start industries which would bring more cash money to Ranau, so we could buy more of what the merchants offered—not merely toys and baubles, but better tools. This I told my father, but he would not hear of it, and at last I departed without his blessing."

Djuanda glanced up again, anxious to justify himself. "Oh, I was not altogether foolish, tuan. I had written to the mine chiefs here, offering myself as an engineer apprentice. One of them had written back, agreeing to give me a position. I knew it would be humble, but I could learn in it. So I thought."

"Have a drink," said Flandry, sloshing arrack into his guest's cup. "What happened?"

Djuanda demurred. It took several minutes and numerous sips of the now high-octane tea before he broke down and admitted he'd been played for a sucker. The job was as advertised—but he had to buy equipment like respirators out of the company slop chest, at a stagger-

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ing markup. Before long he was in debt. Someone took him out on a bender to forget his troubles, and steered him into a clip joint. What with one thing and another, Djuanda lost what he had, borrowed from a loan shark to recoup, lost that too, and finally faced the prospect of crawling back to the loan shark to borrow ten silvers for his next pill.

"Couldn't you write home for help?" Flandry asked.

The immature face grew stiff with pride. "I had defied my father's will, tuan. In the hearing of all our Tree, I said I was now a man able to look after myself. Did I not at least make my own way home again, his dignity would suffer as much as mine. No. I found another eager young man, the gods be pitiful toward him, who wanted my position and could pay me somewhat for it. I sold all I owned. It was still not enough. I went to the dispenser and told him he could keep my last pill, recording it as issued to me, for fifty goldens. He would only give me five." (*Black market resale value, one hundred goldens,* Flandry remembered. The poor rube from Ranau had had no concept of haggling.) "So I could not buy passage home. But at least I now had enough to clear my name from debt. I flung the coins in the moneylender's face. Then for days I tried to find other work, any work, but it was only offered to me if I would become a slave. No man of Ranau has ever been a slave. I went forth at last to die honorably. But you came by, tuan. So I suppose the gods do not want me yet," finished Djuanda naively.

"I see." To cover his own need for a thinking space, as well as the boy's, Flandry raised his cup. "Confusion to moneylenders!"

"Damnation to Biocontrol," said Djuanda, with a slight hiccough.

"What?" Flandry set down his own cup and stared.

"Nothing!" Fear rose in the dark liquid eyes. "Nothing, tuan! I said not a word!"

This might bear further investigation, Flandry thought with excitement. *I was wondering what the hell to do about this lad —couldn't have him tagging along with his big wet ears a-flap in the breeze—not when my scalp is still wanted—But this makes him, perhaps, a lucky find. The first I've heard who's said anything against Biocontrol itself. He's too young to have thought of it on his own. So . . . somewhere in his home town, at least one older person—probably more —has daydreamed about a revolution—*

The soup arrived. Djuanda forgot his terrors in attacking it. Flandry poured more liquor and

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ate at a calmer pace. While they waited for the main course, he said conversationally, "I've never heard of Ranau. Tell me about it. . . ."

A rijstaffel, properly made, is a noble dish requiring a couple of hours to eat. Then there was sherbet, with more tea and arrack. And a pair of strolling dancers came up to earn a few coppers by entertaining the wealthy man. And another jug of arrack seemed indicated. And there was a never ending string of toasts to drink.

The white sun climbed to the zenith and toppled. Shadows rose under the mountain. When the sun went behind the crater, the sky was still blue, but it duskened rapidly and the evening star was kindled over eastern ridges. A low cold wind piped along ashen slopes, whipping the first streamers of cloud before it.

Flandry stood up, relieving cramped muscles in a giant yawn. "We'll go back to my room," he suggested. Djuanda, unhardened to drinking, gave him a blurry look. Flandry laughed and tossed the boy his cloak. "Here, better put this on. You look as if you can stand an overnight nap. We'll talk further after sunrise."

It seemed as good a way as any of putting Djuanda on the shelf while he assessed his own situation with respect to Luang. (And to Kemul. Never forget those enormous strangler's hands.) Alcohol glowed along Flandry's veins, but his new confidence could also be justified logically. If Luang had indeed decided to hate him—or even if she remained too stubborn about an escape attempt—Djuanda offered a ready-made entree to Ranau. What hints he had gotten suggested to Flandry that Ranau could prove useful. Very useful, perhaps.

Below the retaining wall, where shadows had already engulfed the slopes, lamps were twinkling to life. But fog rose up, to blur and finally smother those tiny strewn stars. Flandry guided a somewhat wobbly Djuanda, who sang songs, up the sharp trail toward the Inn of the Nine Serpents. Having negotiated the last ladder and crossed the terrace, he went down the fumarole to his door. It had an ancient type of lock, he must grope for his key . . . no, wait, it wasn't locked after all, so his companions must be in there expecting his return. . . . With a split second's hesitation, Flandry opened the door and stepped through.

Two green-kilted men snatched at his arms. Across the chamber, Flandry saw a dozen more. Kemul and Luang sat with ankles

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lashed together. Flandry got one look at the girl's face turned toward his. *"Get out!"* he heard her scream. A Guard smacked his stick against her temple. She sagged into Kemul's lap. The mugger roared.

Nias Warouw leaned against the farther wall, smoking an outplanet cigaret and smiling.

Flandry had barely glimpsed the men closing in on either side. His reaction was too fast for thought. Spinning on his heel, he drove stiff-held fingers into the throat before him. It was one way to break your hand, unless you struck your enemy with a vector precisely normal to the skin. Flandry opened the throat and tore the windpipe across.

The other man was upon his back. Arms closed around the Terran's neck. Flandry's head was already down, chin protecting larynx. He dropped straight through the hug, hit the floor and rolled over.

The Guard backed into the doorway. His knife gleamed forth. The rest of Warouw's troops stalked closer, their own blades drawn.

Flandry bounced to his feet, reached in his shirt, and yanked out the pistol he had captured.

He didn't waste his breath crowing. Not when knives and clubs could be hurled from every side. He shot.

Four men went down in as many explosions. The others milled back. Flandry's eyes searched through a reeking haze of cordite. Where was their chief now—? Warouw looked out from behind one of the rough pillars upholding the ceiling. Still he smiled. Flandry fired and missed. Warouw's right hand emerged, with a modern Betelgeusean blaster.

Flandry didn't stop for heroics. He didn't even stop to make a conscious decision. His chance of hitting Warouw with his own clumsy weapon was negligible. A single wide-beam low-energy blaster shot couldn't possibly miss. It would roll him screaming on the floor. Later, if he wanted to take the trouble, Warouw could have his seared prisoner treated in some hospital.

The Guard at the door was down with a slug in his chest. The door stood open. Flandry went through it.

As he burst out on the terrace again, Warouw was close behind. The rest of the Guards swarmed shouting in their wake. The dusk was cool and blue, almost palpable surrounding all things and drowning them. Mist and smoke hung in it. Flandry bounded down the ladder to the trail-street.

There went a rumbling through air and earth. Briefly,

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flame gushed in the sky. From an open doorway came the sound of crockery falling and smashing; a woman ran out with a scream. Flandry glimpsed several men halted in their tracks, looking up toward the crater. Their bodies were shadows in this vague twilight, but the gleam of a lamp touched white eyeballs. Further down the trail, the barely visible mass of the crowds had stopped seething. Their mutter lifted between black walls.

Gunung Utara was angry.

Warouw paused only an instant at the foot of the ladder. Then a flashbeam sprang from his left hand and speared Flandry. The Terran whirled, dashed from the light, over the pebbles to the retaining wall. He heard footfalls rattle behind him.

At this point, he remembered, the downslope beyond the wall was steep and rugged. He made out a boulder, and leaped from the wall to its top. Another shock went through the ground. The boulder stirred beneath him and he heard lesser stones grind valleyward. Warouw's flash darted from the wall, here, there, hunting him. Where to go? He could see naught but darkness and thickening fogs. No, wait . . . was that another jut of rock, two meters away? No time to wonder. He sprang. Almost, he missed, and heard below him the shifting of debris which would cut his feet to rags if he landed in it. He grasped an invisible roughnesses, pulled himself up on top of the crag, spied another mass below him, and jumped to that.

Warouw's light bobbed in pursuit.

Flandry realized he was cutting across town. He didn't know how long he sprang from coign to coign. It was all mist and darkness. Somehow he crossed another safety wall, landed on a terrace, scrambled to the trail beneath, and sped among emptied caves.

Panther to his mountain goat, Warouw followed. Once in a while, for a fractional second, his light picked out the Terran.

Then Flandry was beyond the city. The trail petered out. He ran across a bare slope, over black cinders and among crags like tall ghosts.

He could just see how sharply the ground rose on his left, almost a cliff, up to the crater rim. Gunung Utara thundered. Flandry felt the noise in his teeth and marrow. Cinders shifted, dust filled his nostrils. Somewhere a boulder went hurtling and bouncing down toward the valley. Smoke boiled from the crater, a solid column three kilometers high, lit from beneath with dull flickering red.

Flandry looked back. The

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flashbeam jiggled in a gloom where streamers of mist seemed to glow white. He lurched onward. A few times he stumbled, teetered on the uneasy slope, and heard a roar as the scree slid downward. No use heading that way, unless he wanted to die in chunks. He sobbed for air, his lungs were twin deserts and his gullet afire.

A sheer wall rose before him. He ran into it and stared stupidly for seconds before he comprehended. The magma dyke. Yes. Yes, that was it. Must be some way up . . . here, a ladder, iron rungs set into the concrete. . . .

He stood on a railed platform and looked down into the channel. The molten rock threw gusts of heat and poison gas at him. It growled and glowed, ember colored, but he thought he could see tiny flames sheet back and forth across its current. If he wasn't crazy. If he wasn't dreaming.

There was no way to go from here. No bridge, no catwalk to the other side. Not even a flat top on the levee itself. Only the platform, where the engineers could stand to check the stone river. Why should there be more? Flandry leaned on the rail and fought to breathe.

A voice from below, hardly discernible through racing blood and the snarl of Gunung Utara —but cool, almost amused: "If you wish to immolate yourself in the lava, Captain, you still have time. Or you can stay there, holding us off, till the fumes have overcome you. Or, of course, you can surrender now. In that case, the persons who assisted you will not be put in the cage."

Flandry croaked, "Will you let them go?"

"Come, come," chided Warouw. "Let us be sensible. I promise nothing except to spare them the ultimate punishment."

Somewhere in the pounding weariness of his brain, Flandry thought that he should at least make an epigram. But it was too much like work. He threw his gun into the lava. "I'll be down in a minute," he sighed.

X

AWAKENING was slow, almost luxurious until he realized the aches and dullnesses in him. He sat up with a groan which turned into an obscenity.

But the chamber was large and cool. Its view of gardens, pools, and small arched bridges was very little spoiled by a wrought-iron grille set in the window-frame. A clean outfit of kilt and sandals lay waiting next to the low bedstead. An alcove behind a screen held a bathroom, complete with shower.

"Well," murmured Flandry to himself, as he let hot needles of water wash some of the stiffness

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out, "it's the minimum decent thing they can do for me . . . after last night." That memory brought a shiver, and he hurriedly continued his graveyard whistling: "So let's hope they do the most. Breakfast, dancing girls, and a first-class one-way ticket to Terra."

Not that they had tortured him. Warouw wasn't that crude. Flandry hoped. Most of the physical suffering had been due his own exhaustion. They didn't let him sleep, but hustled him straight to a highspeed aircar and questioned him all the way to wherever-this-was. Thereafter they continued the grilling, established that he was indeed immune to any drug in their inquisitorial pharmacopeia, but did their best to break his will with his own sheer grogginess. Flandry was on to that method, having applied it himself from time to time; he'd been able to cushion the worst effects by relaxation techniques.

Still, it had been no fun. He didn't even remember being conducted to this room when the party broke up.

He examined himself in the mirror. His dyed hair was showing its natural hue at the roots, his mustache was noticeable again, and the high cheekbones stood forth under a skin stretched tight. Without their lenses, his eyes revealed their own color, but more washed out than normal. *I was interrogated a long time,* he thought. *And then, of course, I may easily have slept for twenty hours.*

He was scarcely dressed when the door opened. A pair of Guards glowered at him. There were truncheons in their hands. "Come," snapped one. Flandry came. He felt inwardly lepidopteral. And why not? For a captain's lousy pay, did the Imperium expect courage too?

He seemed to be in a residential section—rather luxurious, its hallways graciously decorated, servants scurrying obsequiously about—within a much larger building. Or . . . not exactly residential. The apartments he glimpsed didn't look very lived in. Transient, yes, that must be it. A hostel for Biocontrol personnel whose business brought them here. He began to realize precisely where he must be, and his scalp prickled.

At the end of the walk, he was shown into a suite bigger than most. It was fitted in austere taste: black pillars against silvery walls, black tables, one lotus beneath a scroll which was a calligraphic masterpiece. An archway opened on a balcony overlooking gardens, a metal stockade, jungled hills rolling into blue distances. Sunlight and birdsong came through.

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Nias Warouw sat on a cushion before a table set for breakfast. He gestured at the Guards, who bowed very low and departed. Flandry took a place opposite their master. Warouw's short supple body was draped in a loose robe which showed the blaster at his hip. He smiled and poured Flandry's tea with his own hands.

"Good day, Captain," he said. "I trust you are feeling better?"

"Slightly better than a toad with glanders," Flandry admitted.

A servant pattered in, knelt, and put a covered dish on the table. "May I recommend this?" said Warouw. "Filet of badjung fish, lightly fried in spiced oil. It is eaten with slices of chilled coconut—so."

Flandry didn't feel hungry till he began. Then he became suddenly sharkish. Warouw crinkled his face in a still wider smile and heaped the Terran's plate with rice, in which meat and baked fruits were shredded. By the time a platter of tiny omelets arrived, Flandry's animal needs were satisfied enough that he could stop to ask for the recipe.

Warouw gave it to him. "Possibly the aspect of your wide-ranging career most to be envied by a planet-bound individual such as myself, Captain," he added, "is the gastronomical. To be sure, certain crops of Terran origin must be common to a great many human-colonized planets. But soil, climate, and mutation doubtless vary the flavors enormously. And then there are the native foods. Not to mention the sociological aspect: the local philosophy and practice of cuisine. I am happy that our own developments apparently find favor with you."

"Ummm, grmff, chmp," said Flandry, reaching for seconds.

"I myself could wish for more intercourse between Unan Besar and the rest of the galaxy," said Warouw. "Unfortunately, that is impracticable." He poured himself a cup of tea and sipped it, watching the other man with eyes as alert as a squirrel's. He had not eaten heavily.

The Terran finished in half an hour or so. Not being accustomed from badshood to sit cross-legged, he sprawled on the floor in his relaxation. Warouw offered him Spican cigarillos, which he accepted like his soul's salvation.

Inwardly, he thought: *This is an old gimmick. Make things tough for your victim, then quickly ease off the pressure and speak kindly to him. It's broken down a lot of men. As for me . . . I'd better enjoy it while it lasts.*

Because it wasn't going to.

He drew blessedly mild smoke

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into his throat and let it tickle his nose on the way out. "Tell me, Captain, if you will," said Warouw, "what is your opinion of the Terran poet L. de le Roi? I have gotten a few of his tapes from the Betelgeuseans, and while of course a great many nuances must escape me—"

Flandry sighed. "Fun is fun," he said, "but business is business."

"I don't quite understand, Captain."

"Yes, you do. You set an excellent table, and I'm sure your conversation is almost as cultural as you believe. But it's hard for me to expand like a little flowerbud when I don't know what's happening to my friends."

Warouw stiffened, it was barely perceptible, and the first syllable or two of his answer was ever so faintly off key. However, it came smoothly enough, with an amiable chuckle: "You must allow me a few items in reserve, Captain. Accept my word that they are not at the moment suffering at the hands of my department, and let us discuss other things."

Flandry didn't press his point. It would only chill the atmosphere. And he wanted to do as much probing as he could while Warouw was still trying the benevolent uncle act.

Not that anything he learned would help him much. He was thoroughly trapped, and in a while he might be thoroughly destroyed. But action, any action, even this verbal shadowboxing, was one way to avoid thinking about such impolite details.

"Professionally speaking," he said, "I'm interested to know how you trapped me."

"Ah." Warouw gestured with his own cigarillo, not at all loath to expound his cleverness. "Well, when you made your . . . eh . . . departure in Kompong Timur, it might have been the hysterical act of a fool who had simply blundered onto us. If so, you were not to be worried about. But I dared not assume it. Your whole manner indicated otherwise—not to mention the documents, official and personal, which I later studied on your ship. Accordingly, my working hypothesis was that you had some plan for surviving beyond the period in which your first antitoxin dose would be effective. Was there already an underground organization of extraplanetary agents, whom you would seek out? I admit the search for such a group took most of my time for numerous days."

Warouw grimaced. "I pray your sympathy for my plight," he said. "The Guards have faced no serious task for generations. No one resists Biocontrol! The Guards, the entire organization, are escorts and watchdogs at

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best, idiots at worst. Ignoring the proletariat as they do, they have no experience of the criminal subtleties developed by the proletariat. With such incompetents must I chase a crafty up-to-date professional like yourself."

Flandry nodded. He'd gotten the same impression. Modern police and Intelligence methodology—even military science—didn't exist on Unan Besar. Poor, damned Nias Warouw, a born detective forced to re-invent the whole art of detection!

But he had done a disquietingly good job of it.

"My first break came when a district boss named Sumu—ah, you remember?" Warouw grinned. "My congratulations, Captain. He was unwilling to admit how you had taken him, but afraid not to report that he had unwittingly entertained a man of your description. I forced the whole tale from him. Delicious! But then I began to think over the datum it presented. It took me days more; I am not used to such problems. In the end, however, I decided that you would not have carried out so risky an exploit except for money, which you doubtless needed to buy illegal antitoxin. (Oh, yes, I know there is some. I have been trying to tighten up controls on production and distribution. But the inefficiency of centuries must be overcome.) Well, if you had to operate in such fashion, you were *not* in touch with a secret organization. Probably no such organization existed! However, you must have made some contacts in Swamp Town."

Warouw blew smoke rings, cocked his head at the trill of a songbird, and resumed: "I called for the original reports on the case. It was established that in fleeing us you had broken into the establishment of a certain courtesan. She had told the Guards that she fled in terror and knew nothing else. There had been no reason to doubt her. Nor was there now, *a priori*, but I had no other lead. I ordered her brought in for questioning. My squad was told she had left several days before, destination unknown. I ordered that a watch be kept on her antitoxin record. When she appeared at Gunung Utara, I was informed. I flew there within the hour.

"The local dispenser remembered her vividly, and had a recollection of a tall man with her. She had told him where she was staying, so we checked the inn. Yes, she had been careless enough to tell the truth. The innkeeper described her companions, one of whom was almost certainly you. We arrested her and the other man in their rooms and settled back to await you."

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Flandry sighed. He might have known it. How often had he told cubs in the Service never to underestimate an opponent?

"You almost escaped us again, Captain," said Warouw. "A dazzling exhibition, though not one that I recommend you repeat. Even if, somehow, you broke loose once more, all aircars here are locked. The only other way to depart is on foot, with 400 kilometers of dense rain forest to the nearest village. You would never get there before your antitoxin wore off."

Flandry finished his cigarillo and crushed it with regret. "Your only reason for isolating this place that much," he said, "is that you make the pills here."

Warouw nodded. "This is Biocontrol Central. If you think you can steal a few capsules for your jungle trip, I suppose you can try. Pending distribution, they are kept in an underground vault protected by identification doors, automatic guns, and—as the initial barrier—a hundred trusted Guards."

"I don't plan to try," said Flandry.

Warouw stretched; muscles flowed under his hairless brown skin. "There is no harm in showing you some of the other sections, though," he said. "If you are interested."

I'm interested in anything which will postpone the next round of unfriendliness, acknowledged Flandry. Aloud: "Of course. I might even talk you into dropping your isolationist policy."

Warouw's smile turned bleak. "On the contrary, Captain," he said, "I hope to prove to you that there is no chance of its being dropped, and that anyone who tries to force the issue is choosing a needlessly lingering form of suicide. Come, please."

XI

TWO Guards padded silently behind, but they were no more heeded than Warouw's blaster. The chief took Flandry's arm with a delicate, almost feminine gesture and led him down a hall and a curving ramp to the garden. Here it was cool and full of green odors. Immense purple blooms drooped overhead, scarlet and yellow flowerbeds lined the gravel walks like a formal fire, water plashed high out of carved basins and went rilling under playfully shaped bridges, ketjils were little gold songsparks darting in and out of willow groves. Flandry paid more attention to the building. He was being led across from one wing to the center. It reared huge, the changing styles of centuries discernible in its various parts. Warouw's goal was obviously the oldest section: a sheer black mountain of fused stone, Guards

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at the doors and robot guns on the battlements.

An attendant in an anteroom bowed low and issued four suits. They were coveralls, masked and hooded, of a transparent flexiplast which fitted comfortably enough, though Warouw must leave off his robe. Gloves, boots, and snouted respirators completed the ensemble.

"Germs in there?" asked Flandry.

"Germs on us." For a moment, the nightmare of a dozen generations looked out of Warouw's eyes. He made a sign against evil. "We dare not risk contaminating the vats."

"Of course," suggested Flandry, "you could produce a big enough reserve supply of antitoxin to carry you through any such emergency."

Warouw's worldliness returned. "Now, Captain," he laughed, "would that be practical politics?"

"No," admitted Flandry. "It could easily lead to Biocontrol having to work for a living."

"You never gave the impression of possessing any such peasantish ideal."

"Fate forbid! My chromosomes always intended me for a butterfly, useful primarily as an inspiration to others. However, you must admit a distinction between butterflies and leeches."

Since Flandry had used the name of equivalent native insects, Warouw scowled. "Please Captain!"

The Terran swept eyes across one horrified attendant and two indignant Guards. "Ah, yes," he said, "Little Eva and the Sunshine Twins. Sorry, I forgot about them. Far be it from me to do away with anyone's intellectual maidenhead."

Warouw put his hands to a scanner. The inner door opened for his party and they entered a sterilizing chamber. Beyond its UV and ultrasonics, another door led them into a sort of lobby. A few earnest young shavepates hurried here and there with technical apparatus. They gave the sense of a task forever plagued by clumsy equipment and clumsier organization. Which was to be expected, of course. Biocontrol was not about to modernize its plant. And, like all hierarchies not pruned by incessant competition, Biocontrol had proliferated its departments, regulations, chains of command, protocols, office rivalries, and every other fungus Flandry knew so well on Terra.

A creaky old slideramp bore Warouw's group up several floors. Two purely ornamental Guards lounged on blast rifles outside a gilded door of vast proportions. Several men cooled their heels in the room beyond, waiting for ad-

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mission to the main office. Warouw brushed past them, through a small auxiliary sterilizing chamber and so into the sanctum.

Solu Bandang himself sat among many cushions. He had removed his flexisuit but not donned a robe again. His belly sagged majestically over his kilt. He looked up, heavy-lidded, and whined, "Now what is the meaning of this? What do you mean? I gave no appointment to—Oh. You."

"Greeting, Tuan," said Warouw casually. "I had not expected to find you on duty."

"Yes, it is my turn, my turn again. Even the highest office, ah, in the . . . the world, this world . . . does not excuse a man from a tour of—Necessary to keep one's finger on the pulse, Captain Flandry," said Bandang. "Very essential. Oh, yes, indeed."

The desk didn't look much used. Flandry supposed that the constant presence of some member of the governing board was a survival of earlier days when Biocontrol's stranglehold wasn't quite so firm.

"I trust, ah, you have been made to . . . see the error of your ways Captain?" Bandang reached for a piece of candied ginger. "Your attitude has, I hope, become—realistic?"

"I am still arguing with our guest, Tuan," said Warouw.

"Oh, come now!" said Bandang. "Come now! Really, Colleague, this is deplorable, ah, dilatoriness on your part. Explain to the Captain, Warouw, that we have methods to persuade recalcitrants. Yes, methods. If necessary, apply those methods. But don't come in here disturbing me! He's not in my department. Not my department at all."

"In that case, Tuan," said Warouw, his exasperation hardly curbed, "I beg you to let me proceed with my work in my own fashion. I should like to show the Captain one of our vats. I think it might prove convincing. But of course, we need your presence to get into that section."

"What? What? See here, Warouw, I am a busy man. Busy, do you hear? I have, er, obligations. It is not my duty to—"

"Perhaps," snapped Warouw, "the Tuan feels he can take care of the situation single-handed, when the outworlders arrive?"

"What?" Bandang sat up straight, so fast that his jowls quivered. The color drained from them. "What's that? Do you mean there *are* outworlders? Other, that is, than the Betelgeuseans—uncontrolled outworlders, is that, ah, is that—"

"That is what I have to find out, Tuan. I beg you for your kind assistance."

"Oh. Oh, yes. Yes, at once.

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Immediately!" Bandang rolled to his feet and fumbled at his hung-up flexisuit. The two Guards hastened to assist him in donning it.

Warouw checked an electronic bulletin board. "I see Genseng is on watch at Vat Four," he said. "We'll go there. You must meet Colleague Genseng, Flandry."

The Terran made no answer. He was considering what he had seen. Bandang was a fat fool, but without too many illusions. His horror at the idea of outplanet visitors proved he knew very well what Flandry had already deduced:

God, what an overripe plum! If only the pills could come from somewhere else, this Biocontrol boobocracy and its comic opera Guards wouldn't last a week.

If any adventurers do learn the truth, they'll swarm here from a score of planets. Unan Besar is rich. I don't know how much of that wealth is locked in Biocontrol vaults, but it must be plenty. Enough to make the fortune of an experienced fighting man (like me) who'd serve as a revolutionary officer for a share in the loot.

Unless the revolution happens too fast to import filibusters. I suspect that would be the actual case. The people of Unan Besar would rip their overlords apart bare-handed. And, of course, the real money to be made here is not from plundering, but from selling cheap antitoxin without restrictions. . . . Which is less my line of work than a spot of piracy would be. But I'd still like to get that juicy commission from Mitsuko Laboratories.

The lightness faded in him, less because he remembered his immediate problems than because of certain other recollections. The man who screamed and died in a cage where the stone gods danced. Swamp Town, and humans turned wolf to survive. Hungry men chipping a mountainside by hand, women and children in rice paddies. Djuanda, with nothing left him but pride, leaping off the wall. Luang's eyes, seen across the room where she sat bound. The Guard who struck her with a club.

Flandry had no patience with crusaders, but there are limits to any man's endurance.

"Come, then," puffed Bandang. "Yes, Captain, you really must see our production facilities. A, ah, an achievement. A most glorious achievement, as I am sure you will agree, of our, ah, pioneering ancestors. May their, their work . . . ever remain sacred and undefiled, their blood remain, er, pure."

Behind the plump back, Warouw winked at Flandry.

Passing through the office

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sterilizer, and the waiting technicians who bowed to Bandang, the conducted tour took a slideway down corridors where faded murals depicted the heroic founders of Biocontrol in action. At the slideway's end, a glassed-in catwalk ran above a series of chambers.

They were immense. Up here near the ceilings, Flandry saw technicians down on the floor scuttle like bugs. Each room centered on a gleaming alloy vat, ten meters high and thirty in diameter. With the pipes that ran from it like stiff tentacles, with the pumps and stirrers and testers and control units and meters clustered around, it could have been some heathen god squatting amidst attendant demons. And on more than one face, among the men who went up and down the catwalk, Flandry thought he recognized adoration.

Warouw said in a detached tone: "As you may know, the process of antitoxin manufacture is biological. A yeast-like native organism was mutated to produce, during fermentation, that inhibitor which prevents the bacterial formation of acetylcholine. The bacteria themselves are destroyed within a few days by normal human antibodies. So, if you left this planet, you would need one final pill to flush out the infection. Thereafter you would be free of it. But as long as you are on Unan Besar—each breath you take, each bite you eat or drop you drink, maintains an equilibrium concentration of germs in your system.

"Unfortunately, these omnipresent germs kill the yeast itself. So it is critically important to keep this place sterile. Even a slight contamination would spread like fire in dry grass. The room where it occurred would have to be sealed off, everything dismantled and individually sterilized. It would take a year to get back in operation. And we would be lucky to have only one vat idled."

"A molecular synthesizing plant could turn out a year's biological production in a day, and sneer at germs," said Flandry.

"No doubt. No doubt, Captain," said Bandang. "You are very clever in the Empire. But cleverness isn't all, you know. Not by any means. There are other virtues. Ah . . . Warouw, I think you should not have called the circumstance of, um, easy contamination . . . unfortunate. On the contrary, I would call it most fortunate. A, ah, a divine dispensation, bringing about and protecting the, er, social order most suitable for this world."

"A social order which recog-

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nizes that worthiness is heritable, and allows every blood line to find its natural status under the benevolent guardianship of a truly scientific organization whose primary mission has always been to preserve the genetic and cultural heritage of Unan Besar from degradation and exploitation by basically inferior outsiders," droned Flandry.

Bandang looked surprised. "Why, Captain, have you come to so good an understanding already?"

"Here is Vat Four," said Warouw.

In each chamber, a stairway, also glassed in, led down from the catwalk. Flandry was taken along this one. It ended at a platform several meters above the floor, where a semi-circular board flashed with lights and quivered with dials. Flandry realized the instruments must report on every aspect of the vat's functioning. Underneath them was a bank of master controls for emergency use. At the far left projected a long, double-pole switch, painted dead black. A light at its end glowed like a red eye.

The man who stood motionless before the board would have been impressive in his white robe. Seen kilted through a flexisuit, he was much too thin. Every rib and vertebra could be counted. When he turned around, his face was a skull in sagging skin. But the eyes lived; and, in an eerie way, the glowing golden brand.

"You dare—" he whispered. Recognizing Bandang: "Oh. Your pardon, Tuan." His scorn was hardly veiled. "I thought it must be some fool of a novice who dared interrupt a duty officer."

Bandang stepped back. "Ah . . . really, Genseng," he huffed. "You go too far. Indeed you do. I, ah, I demand respect. Yes."

The eyes smoldered at them. "I am duty officer here until my relief arrives." The murmur of pumps came more loudly through the glass cage than Genseng's voice. "You know the Law."

"Yes. Yes, indeed. Of course. But—"

"The duty officer is supreme at his station, Tuan. My decisions may not be questioned. I could kill you for a whim, and the Law would uphold me. Holy is the Law."

"Indeed. Indeed." Bandang wiped his countenance. "I too . . . after all, I too have my watches to stand—."

"In an office," sneered Genseng.

Warouw trod cockily to the fore. "Do you remember our guest, Colleague?" he asked.

"Yes." Genseng brooded at Flandry. "The one who came

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from the stars and leaped out the window. When does he go in the cage?"

"Perhaps never," said Warouw. "I think he might be induced to cooperate with us."

"He is unclean," mumbled Genseng. The hairless skull turned back toward the dance of instruments, as if beauty dwelt there alone.

"I thought you might wish to demonstrate the controls to him."

"S-s-s-so." Genseng's eyes filmed over. He stood a long while, moving his lips without sound. At last: "Yes. I see."

Suddenly his gaze flamed at the Terran. "Look out there," the parchment voice ordered. "Watch those men serving the vat. If any of them makes an error—if any of a hundred possible errors are made, or a thousand possible misfunctions of equipment occur—the batch now brewing will spoil and a million people will die. Could you bear such a burden?"

"No," said Flandry, as softly as if he walked on fulminate.

Genseng swept one chalky hand at the panel. "It is for me to see the error or the failure on these dials, and correct it in time with these master controls. I have kept track. Three hundred and twenty-seven times since I first became a duty officer, I have saved a batch from spoiling. Three hundred and twenty-seven million human lives are owed me. Can you claim as much, outworlder?"

"No."

"They owe more than their lives, though," said Genseng somberly. "What use is life, if all that life is for should be lost? Better return the borrowed force at once, unstained, to the most high gods, than dirty it with wretchedness like your own, outworlder. Unan Besar owes its purity to me and those like me. The lives we have given, we can take again, to save that purity."

Flandry pointed to the black switch and asked very low, "What does that connect to?"

"There is a nuclear bomb buried in the foundations of this castle," Genseng breathed. "Any duty officer can detonate it from his station. All are sworn to do so, if the holy mission should ever fail."

Flandry risked cynicism: "Though of course a reserve stock of medicine, and enough spaceships for Biocontrol to escape in, are kept available."

"There are those who would do such a thing," sighed Genseng. "Even here the soul-infection lingers. But let them desert, then, to their own damnation. I can at least save most of my people."

He turned back to his panel with a harsh movement. "Go!" he yelled.

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Bandang actually ran back up the stairs.

Warouw came last, smiling. Bandang mopped his face, which poured sweat. "Really!" puffed the governor. "Really! I do think . . . honorable retirement . . . Colleague Genseng does appear to, ah, feel his years—"

"You know the Law, Tuan," said Warouw unctuously. "No one who wears the Brand may be deposed, except by vote of his peers. You couldn't get enough votes to do it, and you would anger the whole extremist faction." He turned to Flandry. "Genseng is a somewhat violent case, I admit. But there are enough others who feel like him, to guarantee that this building would go skyhigh if Biocontrol ever seemed seriously threatened."

Flandry nodded. He'd been a bit skeptical of such claims before. Now he wasn't.

"I don't know what good this has done," said Bandang softly.

"Perhaps the Captain and I might best discuss that," bowed Warouw.

"Perhaps. Good day, then, Captain." Bandang raised one fat hand in a patronizing gesture. "I trust we shall meet again . . . ah . . . elsewhere than the cage? Of course, of course! Good day!" He wobbled quickly down the catwalk.

Warouw conducted Flandry at a slower pace. They didn't speak for minutes, until they had turned back their flexisuits and were again in the garden and the blessed sane sunlight.

"What do you actually want to convince me of, Warouw?" asked the Terran then.

"Of the truth," said the other man. Banter had dropped from him; he looked straight ahead, and his mouth was drawn downward.

"Which is short-sighted self-interest utilizing fanaticism to perpetuate itself . . . and fanaticism running away with self-interest," said Flandry in a sharp tone.

Warouw shrugged. "You take the viewpoint of a different culture."

"And of most of your own people. You know that as well as I. Warouw, what have you to gain by the status quo? Are your money, your fancy lodging, your servants, that important to you? You're an able chap. You could gain all you now have, and a lot more besides, in the modern galactic society."

Warouw glanced back at the two Guards and answered softly: "What would I be there, another little politician making dirty little compromises—or Nias Warouw whom all men fear?"

He jumped at once to a discourse on willow cultivation, pointing out with expert knowledge the local evolution of the

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original important stock, until they were again at Flandry's room.

The door opened. "Go in and rest for a while," said Warouw. "Then think whether to cooperate freely or not."

"You've been harping for some time on the need for my cooperation," said Flandry. "But you've not made it clear what you want of me."

"First, I want to know for certain why you came here," Warouw met his eyes unblinkingly. "If you do not resist it, a light hypnoprobing will get that out of you quite easily. Then you must help me prepare false evidence of your own accidental death, and head off any Terran investigation. Thereafter you will be appointed my special assistant—for life. You will advise me on how to modernize the Guard Corps and perpetuate this world's isolation." He smiled with something like shyness. "I think we might both enjoy working together. We are not so unlike, you and I."

"Suppose I don't cooperate," said Flandry.

Warouw flushed and snapped: "Then I must undertake a deep hypnoprobing and drag your information out of you. I confess I have had very little practice with the instrument since acquiring it. Even in skilled hands, you know, the hypnoprobe at full strength is apt to destroy large areas of cerebral cortex. In unskilled hands—But I will at least get *some* information out of you before your mind evaporates!"

He bowed. "I shall expect your decision tomorrow. Good rest."

The door closed behind him.

Flandry paced in silence. He would have traded a year of life for a pack of Terran cigarets, but he hadn't even been supplied with locals. It was like a final nail driven into his coffin.

What to do?

Cooperate? Yield to the probe? But that meant allowing his mind to ramble in free association, under the stimulus of the machine. Warouw would hear everything Flandry knew about the Empire in general and Naval Intelligence in particular. Which was one devil of a lot.

In itself, that would be harmless—if the knowledge stayed on this planet. But it was worth too much. A bold man like Warouw was certain to exploit it. The Merseians, for instance, would gladly establish a non-interfering protectorate over Unan Besar—it would only tie down a cruiser or two—in exchange for the information about Terran defenses which Warouw could feed them in shrewd driblets. Or better, perhaps, Warouw could take a ship himself and search out those barbarians with space-

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craft Flandry knew of: who would stuff the vessel of Warouw with loot from Terran planets which he could tell them how to raid.

Either way, the Long Night was brought that much closer.

Of course, Dominic Flandry would still be alive, as a sort of domesticated animal. He couldn't decide if it was worth it or not.

Thunder rolled in the hills. The sun sank behind clouds which boiled up to cover the sky. A few fat raindrops smote a darkening garden.

I wonder if I get anything more to eat today, thought Flandry in his weariness.

He hadn't turned on the lights. His room was nearly black. When the door opened, he was briefly dazzled. The figure that stepped through was etched against corridor illumination like a troll.

Flandry retreated, fists clenched. After a moment he realized it was only a Biocontrol uniform, long robe with flaring shoulders. But did they want him already? His heart thuttered in anticipation.

"Easy, there," said a vaguely familiar voice.

Lightning split heaven. In an instant's white glare, Flandry made out shaven head, glowing brand, and the broken face of Kemul the mugger.

XII

HE SAT down. His legs wouldn't hold him.

"Where in the nine foul hells is your light switch?" grumbled the basso above him. "We've little enough time. They may spare you if we are caught, but the cage for Kemul. Quick!"

The Terran got shakily back on his feet. "Stay away from the window," he said. A dim amazement was in him, that he could speak without stuttering. "I'd hate for some passerby to see us alone together. He might misunderstand the purity of our motives. Ah." Light burst from the ceiling.

Kemul took a rich man's garments from under his robe and tossed them on the bed: sarong, curly-toed slippers, blouse, vest, turban with an enormous plume. "Best we can do," he said. "Biocontrol disguise and a painted brand would not go for you. Your scalp would be paler than your face, and your face itself sticking out for all to see. But some great merchant or landowner, come here to talk of some policy matter— Also, speaking earnestly with you as we go, Kemul will not have to observe so many fine points of politeness and rule which he never learned."

Flandry tumbled into the clothes. "How'd you get in here at all?" he demanded.

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Kemul's thick lips writhed upward. "That is another reason we must hurry, you. Two dead Guards outside." He opened the door, stooped, and yanked the corpses in. Their necks were broken with one karate chop apiece. A firearm would have made too much noise, Flandry thought in a daze. Even a cyanide needler with a compressed air cartridge would have to be drawn and fired, which might give time for a warning to be yelled. But a seeming Biocontrol man could walk right past the sentries, deep in meditation, and kill them in one second as they saluted him. That ability of Kemul's must have counted for enough that his cohorts (who?) sent him in rather than somebody of less noticeable appearance.

"But how'd you get this far, I mean?" Flandry persisted a trifle wildly.

"Landed outside the hangar, as they all do. Said to the attendant, Kemul was here from Pegunungan Gradjugang on urgent business and might have to depart again in minutes. Walked into the building, cornered a Guard alone in a hall, wrung from him where you were being kept, threw the body out a window into some bushes. Once or twice a white-robe hailed Kemul, but he said he was in great haste and went on."

Flandry whistled. It would have been a totally impossible exploit on any other world he had ever seen. The decadence of Biocontrol and its Guard Corps was shown naked by this fact of an enemy walking into their ultimate stronghold without so much as being questioned. To be sure, no one in all the history of Unan Besar had ever dreamed of such a raid; but still—

But still it was a fantastic gamble, with the odds against it mounting for each second of delay.

"I sometimes think we overwork Pegunungan Gradjugang." Flandry completed his ensemble. "Have a weapon for me?"

"Here." Kemul drew out of his robe a revolver as antiquated as the one liberated from Pradjung (how many eons ago?). The same gesture showed his Terran blaster in an arm sheath. "Hide it. No needless fighting."

"Absolutely! You wouldn't believe how meek my intentions are. Let's go."

The hall was empty. Flandry and Kemul went down it, not too fast, mumbling at each other as if deep in discourse. At a cross-corridor they met a technician, who bowed his head to Kemul's insigne but couldn't entirely hide astonishment. The technician continued the way they had come. If he passed Flandry's closed door and happened to

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know that two Guards were supposed to be outside—

The hall debouched in a spacious common room. Between its pillars and gilded screens, a dozen or so off-duty Biocontrol people sat smoking, reading, playing games, watching a taped dance program. Flandry and Kemul started across toward the main entrance. A middle-aged man with a Purity Control symbol on his robe intercepted them.

"I beg your pardon, Colleague," he bowed. "I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before, though I thought I knew all full initiates." His eyes were lively with interest. A tour of duty here must be a drab chore for most personnel, any novelty welcomed. "And I had no idea we were entertaining a civilian of such obvious importance."

Flandry bent his own head above respectfully folded hands, hoping the plume would shadow his face enough. A couple of men, cross-legged above a chessboard, looked up in curiosity and kept on looking.

"Ameti Namang from beyond the Tindjil Ocean," growled Kemul. "I just came with Proprietor Tasik here. Been on special duty for years."

"Er . . . your accent . . . and I am sure I would remember your face from anywhere—"

Having sidled around to Kemul's other side, so that the giant cut off view of him, Flandry exclaimed in a shocked stage whisper: "I beg you, desist! Can't you tell when a man's been in an accidental explosion?" He took his companion's elbow. "Come, we mustn't keep Tuan Bandang waiting."

The stares which followed him were like darts in his back.

Rain beat heavily on the roof of the verandah beyond. Lamplight glowed along garden paths, but even on this round-the-clock planet they weren't frequented in such weather. Flandry glanced behind, at the slowly closing main doors. "In about thirty seconds," he muttered, "our friend will either shrug off his puzzlement with a remark about the inscrutable ways of his superiors . . . or will start seriously adding two and two. Come on."

They went down the staircase. "Damn!" said Flandry. "You forgot to bring rain capes. Think a pair of drowned rats can reclaim your aircar?"

"With a blaster, if need be," snapped Kemul. "Stop complaining. You've at least been given a chance to die cleanly. It was bought for you at the hazard of two other lives."

"Two?"

"It wasn't Kemul's idea, this, or his wish."

Flandry fell silent. Rain struck his face and turned his clothes sodden. The path was like a

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treadmill, down which he walked endlessly between wet hedges, under goblin lamps. He heard thunder again, somewhere over the jungle.

Sudden as a blow, the garden ended. Concrete glimmered in front of a long hemicylindrical building. "Here's where everybody lands," grunted Kemul. He led the way to the office door. A kilted civilian emerged and bobbed the head to him. "Where's my car?" said Kemul.

"So soon, tuan? You were only gone a short while—"

"I told you I would be. And you garaged my car anyhow? You officious dolt!" Kemul shoved with a brutal hand. The attendant picked himself up and hurried to the hangar doors.

Whistles skirled through the rain-rushing. Flandry looked back. Mountainous over all bowers and pools, the Central blinked windows to life like opening eyes. The attendant paused to gape. "Get moving!" roared Kemul.

"Yes, tuan. Yes, tuan." A switch was pulled, the doors slid open. "But what is happening?"

I don't know, Flandry thought. *Maybe my absence was discovered. Or else somebody found a dead Guard. Or our friend in the common room got suspicious and called for a checkup. Or any of a dozen other possibilities. The end result is still the same.*

He slipped a hand inside his blouse and rested it on the butt of his gun.

Lights went on in the hangar. It was crowded with aircars belonging to men serving their turns here. The attendant stared idiotically around, distracted by whistles and yells and sound of running feet. "Now, let's see, tuan, which one is yours? I don't rightly recall, I don't—"

Four or five Guards emerged from the garden path into the lamplight of the field. "Get the car, Kemul," rapped Flandry. He drew his revolver and slipped behind the shelter of a door. The attendant's jaw dropped. He let out a squeak and tried to run. Kemul's fist smote at the base of his skull. The attendant flew in an arc, hit, skidded across concrete, and lay without breathing.

"That was unnecessary," said Flandry. It wrenched within him: *Always the innocent get hurt worst.*

The mugger was already among the cars. The squad of Guards broke into a run. Flandry stepped from behind his door long enough to fire several times. One man spun around on his heel, went over backward, and raised himself on all fours with blood smeared over his chest. The others scattered. And they bawled for help.

Flandry took another peek. The opposite side of the landing

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field was coming alive with Guards. Through their shouts and the breaking of branches under their feet, through the rain, boomed Warouw's voice: "Surround the hangar. Squads Four, Five, Six, prepare to storm the entrance. Seven, Eight, Nine, prepare to fire on emerging vehicles." He must be using a portable amplifier, but it was still like hearing the voice of an angered god.

Kemul grunted behind Flandry, shoving parked craft aside to clear a straight path for his own. As the three assault squads started to run across the concrete, Flandry heard him call: "Get in, quick!"

The Terran sent a dozen shots into the nearing troop, whirled, and jumped. Kemul was at the controls of one vehicle, gunning the motor. He had left the door to the pilot section open. Flandry got a foot in it as the car spurted forward. Then they struck the Guards entering the hangar.

Somebody shrieked. Somebody else crunched beneath the wheels, horribly. One man seized Flandry's ankle. Almost, the Terran was pulled loose. He shot, missed, and felt his antique weapon jam. He threw it at the man's contorted brown face. The car jetted antigrav force and sprang upward. Flandry clung to the doorframe with two hands and one foot. He kicked with the captured leg. His enemy hung on, screaming. Somehow Flandry found strength to raise the leg until it pointed almost straight out, then bring it down again to bash his dangling burden against the side.

The Guard let go and fell a hundred meters. Flandry toppled back into the control section.

"They'll have an armed flyer after us in sixty seconds," he gasped. "Gimme your place!"

Kemul glared at him. "What do you know about steering?"

"More than any planet hugger. Get out! Or d' you want us to be overhauled and shot down?"

Kemul locked eyes with Flandry. The wrath in his gaze was shocking. A panel cut off the rear section; this was a rich man's limousine, though awkward and underpowered compared to the Guard ships Flandry had ridden. The panel slid back. Luang leaned into the pilot compartment and said, "Let him have the wheel, Kemul. Now!"

The mugger spat an oath, but gave up his seat. Flandry vaulted into it. "I don't imagine this horse cart has acceleration compensators," he said. "So get astern and buckle down tight!"

He concentrated for a moment on the controls. It was an old-fashioned, unfamiliar make of car, doubtless unloaded by some

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wily Betelgeusean trader. But having handled many less recognizable craft before, and being in peril of his life, Flandry identified all instruments in a few seconds.

Outside was darkness. Rain whipped the windshield. He saw lightning far off to the left. Making a spiral, he searched with his radar for pursuit. Biocontrol Central glittered beneath him. His detector beeped and registered another vessel on a collision path. The autopilot tried to take over. Flandry cut it out of the circuit and began to climb.

His track was a long slant bearing toward the storm center. The radar on this medieval galley wouldn't show what was behind him, but doubtless the Guard car had him spotted and was catching up fast. A whiering scream reminded Flandry he hadn't slid the door shut. He did so, catching a few raindrops on his face. They tasted of wind.

Up and up. Now the lightning flashes were picking out detail for him, cumulus masses that rolled and reared against heaven and dissolved into a cataract at their base. Gusts thrummed the metal of the car. Its controls bucked. Thunder filled the cabin.

With maximum speed attained, Flandry cut the drive beams, flipped 180 degrees around with a lateral thrust, and went back on full power. An instant he hung, killing velocity. Then he got going downward.

At a kilometer's distance, the other vehicle came into view: a lean shark shape with twice his speed. It swelled monstrously to his eye. There were about ten seconds for its pilot to react. As Flandry had expected, the fellow crammed all he had into a sidewise leap, getting out of the way. Even so, Flandry shot past with about one meter to spare. He was really moving.

Gauging the last possible instant of deceleration was a matter of trained reflex. When he applied the brake force, Flandry heard abused frames groan, and he was almost thrown into his own windshield. He came to a halt just above the tossing jungle crowns. At once he shifted to a horizontal course. Faster than any man not trained in space would have dared—or been able—he flew, his landing gear centimeters from the uppermost leaves. Now and then he must veer, barely missing a higher than average tree. He plunged into the wild waterfall of the storm center, and saw lightning rive one such tree not ten meters away.

But up in the sky, his pursuer, having lost speed and course and object, must be casting about in an ever more desperate search for him.

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Flandry continued skimming till he was on the other side of the rain. Only then, a good fifty kilometers from Biocontrol Central, did he venture to rise a little and use his own radar again. It registered nothing. Tropical stars bloomed in the violet night haze. The air alone had voice, as he slipped through it.

"We're the one that got away," he said.

He regained altitude and looked back into the main section. Kemul sagged in his chair. "You could have crashed us, you drunken amokker!" choked the big man. Luang unstrapped herself and took out a cigaret with fingers not quite steady. "I think Dominic knew what he did," she answered.

Flandry locked the controls and went back to join them, flexing sore muscles. "I think so too," he said. He flopped down beside Luang. "Hi, there."

She gave him an unwavering look. The cabin light was lustrous on her dark hair and in the long eyes. He saw developing bruises where the violence of his maneuvers had thrown her against the safety belt. But still she regarded him, until at last he must shift uneasily and bum a cigaret, merely to break that silence.

"Best you pilot us now, Kemul," she said.

The mugger snorted, but moved forward as she desired. "Where are we going?" Flandry asked.

"Ranau," said Luang. She took her eyes from him and drew hard on her cigaret. "Where your friend Djuanda is."

"Oh. I believe I see what happened. But tell me."

"When you escaped from the inn, all those imbecilic Guards went whooping after you," she said, unemotional as a history lesson. "Djuanda had been behind you when you entered, and had stayed in the corridor during the fight. No one noticed him. He was intelligent enough to come in as soon as they were all gone, and release us."

"No wonder Warouw despises his own men," said Flandry. "Must have been disconcerting, returning to find the cupboard bare like that. Though he coolly led me to believe you were still his prisoners. Go on, what did you do next?"

"We fled, of course. Kemul hot-wired a parked aircar. Djuanda begged us to save you. Kemul scoffed at the idea. It looked impossible to me too, at first. It was bad enough being fugitives, who would live only as long as we could contrive to get illicit pills. But three people, against the masters of a planet —?"

"You took them on, though." Flandry brought his lips close

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enough to her ear that they brushed her cheek. "I've no way to thank you for that, ever."

Still she gazed straight before her, and the full red mouth shaped words like a robot: "Chiefly you should thank Djuanda. His life was a good investment of yours. He insisted we would not be three alone. He swore many of his own people would help, if there was any hope at all of getting rid of Biocontrol. So . . . we went to Ranau. We spoke to the boy's father, and others. In the end, they provided this car, with plans and information and disguises such as we would need. Now we are bound back to them, to see what can be done next."

Flandry looked hard at her in his turn. "You made the final decision, to rescue me, Luang," he said. "Didn't you?"

She stirred on the seat. "What of it?" Her voice was no longer under absolute control.

"I'd like to know why. It can't be simple self-preservation. On the contrary. You got black market antitoxin before; you could have kept on doing so. When my knowledge was wrung out of me, Warouw would understand you were no danger to him. He wouldn't have pressed the hunt for you. You could probably even snare some influential man and tease him into getting you pardoned. So—if we're going to work together, Luang—I want to know why you chose it."

She stubbed out her cigaret. "Not for any of your damned causes!" she snarled. "I don't care about a hundred million clods, any more than I ever did. It was only . . . to rescue you, we must have help in Ranau, and those oafs would only help as part of a plot to overthrow Biocontrol. That's all!"

Kemul hunched his great shoulders, turned around and rumbled, "If you don't stop baiting her, Terran, Kemul will feed you your own guts."

"Close your panel," said Luang.

The giant averted his face again, sucked in a long breath, and slid shut the barrier between him and the others.

Wind lulled around the flyer. Flandry turned off the lights and saw stars on either side. It was almost as if he could reach out and pluck them.

"I'll answer no more impertinent questions," said Luang. "Is it not enough that you have gotten your own way?"

He caught her to him and her own question went unanswered.

XIII

RANAU lay on a northeasterly jut of the continent, with Kompong Timur a good thou-

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sand kilometers to the southwest. Intervening swamp and mountain, lack of navigable rivers, before all the standoffishness of its people, made it little frequented. A few traders flew in during the year, otherwise the airstrip was hardly used. It was still dark when Flandry's car set down. Several impassive men with phosphorescent globes to light their way met him, and he was horrified to learn it was ten kilometers' walk to the nearest dwelling.

"We make no roads under the Trees," said Tembesi, Djuanda's father. And that was that.

Dawn came while they were still afoot. As the spectacle grew before him, Flandry's life added one more occasion of awe.

The ground was low, wet, thickly covered with a soft and intensely green moss-like turf. It sparkled with a million water drops. Fog rolled and streamed, slowly breaking up as the sun climbed. The air was cool, and filled the nostrils with dampness. His tread muffled and upborne by the springy growth, his companions unspeaking and half blurred in the mist, Flandry moved through silence like a dream.

Ahead of him, rising out of a fog bank into clear sky, were the Trees of Ranau.

There were over a thousand, but only a few could be seen at one time. They grew too far apart, a kilometer or more between boles. And they were too big.

Hearing Djuanda tell of them, mentioning an average height of two hundred meters and an estimated average age of ten thousand Terrestrial years, Flandry had imagined the redwoods he knew from home. But this was not Terra. The great Trees were several times as thick in proportion—incredibly massive, organic mountains with roots like foothills. They shot straight up for fifty meters or so, then began to branch, broadest at the bottom, tapering to a spire. The slim higher boughs would each have made a Terran oak; the lowest were forests in themselves, forking again and yet again, the five-pointed leaves (small, delicately serrated, green on top but with a golden underside of nearly mirror brightness) outnumbering the visible stars. Even given the lower gravity of Unan Besar, it was hard to imagine how branches so huge could support their own weight. But they had cores with a strength approximating steel, surrounded by a principal thickness of wood as light as balsa, the whole armored in tough gray bark. Tossing in the gentle winds which prevailed here, the upper leaves reflected sunlight downward off their shiny sides, so

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that the lower foliage was not shadowed to death.

No matter explanations. When Flandry saw the grove itself, filling the sky, sunlight winking and shivering and running like flame in the crowns, he merely stood and looked. The others respected his need. For long, the whole party remained silent where it was.

When they resumed—passing through a stand of tall frondtrees without even noticing—the Terran found tongue once more: "I understand your people are freeholders. That's rare, isn't it?"

Tembesi, who was a big stern-faced man, replied slowly: "We are not quite what you think. Early in the history of this planet, it became clear that the free yeoman was doomed. The large plantations were underselling him, so he was driven to subsistence farming, with the price of antitoxin too high for him to afford improvements. Let him have one bad year, and he must sell land to the plantation owner, just to pay for survival. Presently his farm became too small to support him, he fell into the grip of the moneylenders, in the end he was fortunate if he became a tenant rather than a slave.

"Our own ancestors were peasants whose leaders foresaw the loss of land. They sold what they had and moved here. There were certain necessities of survival as free men. First, some means of getting cash for antitoxin and tools. Yet, second, not enough wealth to excite the greed of the great lords, who could always find a pretext to dispossess their inferiors. Third, remoteness from the corruption and violence of the cities, the countryside's ignorance and poverty. Fourth, mutual helpfulness, so that individual misfortunes would not nibble away the new community as the old had been destroyed.

"These things were found among the Trees."

And now they left the minor forest and approached the holy grove. It was not as dark under one of the giants as Flandry had expected. The overshadowing roof of leaves twinkled, flashed, glittered, so that sunspecks went dancing among the shades. Small animals scurried out of the way, around the nearest root which heaved its gray wall up from the pseudomoss. Redbreasted fluter birds and golden ketjils darted in and out of the foliage overhead; their song drifted down through a distant, eternal rustle, that was like some huge waterfall heard across many leagues of stillness. Close to a Tree, you had no real sense of its height. It was too enormous: simply *there*, blocking off half the world.

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Looking ahead, down the clear shadowy sward, you got a total effect, arched and whispering vaults full of sun, upheld by columns that soared. The forest floor was strewn with tiny white blossoms.

Djuanda turned worshipful eyes from Flandry and said, reddening: "My father, I am ashamed that ever I wished to change this."

"It was not an ill-meant desire," said Tembesi. "You were too young to appreciate that three hundred years of tradition must hold more wisdom than any single man." His gray head inclined to the Terran. "I have yet to offer my thanks for the rescuing of my son, Captain."

"Oh, forget it," muttered Flandry. "You helped rescue me, didn't you?"

"For a selfish purpose. Djuanda, your elders are not quite such doddering old women as you believed. We also want to change the life of the Trees—more than you ever dreamed."

"By bringing the Terrans!" The boy's voice cracked loud and exultant across the quiet.

"Well . . . not exactly," demurred Flandry. He glanced about at the rest. Eager Djuanda, firm Tembesi, sullen Kemul, unreadable Luang holding his arm . . . he supposed they could be relied on. The others, though, soft-spoken men with lithe gait and bold gaze, he didn't know about. "Uh, we can't proceed too openly, or word will get back to Biocontrol."

"That has been thought of," said Tembesi. "All whom you see here are of my own Tree—or clan, if you prefer, since each Tree is the home of a single blood-line. I have talked freedom with them for a long time. Most of our folk can be trusted equally well. Timidity, treachery, or indiscretion might make a few dangerous, but they are very few."

"It only takes one," humphed Kemul.

"How could a traitor get word to the outside?" replied Tembesi. "The next regular trade caravan is not due for many weeks. I have taken good care that no one will depart this area meanwhile. Our few aircraft are all under guard. To go on foot would require more than thirty days to the next communication center . . . hence, would be impossible."

"Unless the local dispenser advanced a few pills given a reasonable-sounding pretext," said Flandry. "Or—wait—the dispenser is in radio touch with Biocontrol all the time!"

Tembesi's chuckle was grim. "Hereabouts," he said, "unpopular dispensers have long tended to meet with accidents. They fall off high branches, or an *adder-*

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kop bites them, or they go for a walk and are never seen again. The present appointee is my own nephew, and one of our inner-circle conspirators."

Flandry nodded, unsurprised. Even the most villainous governments are bound to have a certain percentage of decent people in them—who, given a chance, often become the most effective enemies of the regime.

"We're safe for a while, I suppose," he decided. "Doubtless Warouw will check the entire planet, hoping to pick up my trail. But he's not likely to think of trying here until a lot of other possibilities have failed."

Djuanda's enthusiasm broke loose again: "And you will free our people!"

Flandry would have preferred a less melodramatic phrasing, but hadn't the heart to say so. He addressed Tembesi: "I gather you aren't too badly off here. And that you're conservative. If Unan Besar is opened to free trade, a lot of things are going to change overnight, including your own ways of life. Is it worth that much to you to be rid of Biocontrol?"

"I asked him the same question," said Luang. "In vain. He had already answered it for himself."

"It is worth it," Tembesi said. "We have kept a degree of independence, but at a cruel cost of narrowing our lives. For we seldom, if ever, have money to undertake new things, or even to travel outside our own land. A Tree will not support many hundred persons, so we must limit the children a family may have. A man is free to choose his life work—but the choice is very small. He is free to speak his mind—but there is little to speak about. And always we must pay our hard-won silvers for pills which cost about half a copper to produce; and always we must dread that some overlord will covet our country and find ways to take it from us; and always our sons must look at the stars, and wonder what is there, and grow old and die without having known."

Flandry nodded again. It was another common phenomenon: revolutions don't originate with slaves or starveling proletarians, but with men who have enough liberty and material well-being to realize how much more they ought to have.

"The trouble is," he said, "a mere uprising won't help. If the whole planet rose against Biocontrol, it would only die. What we need is finesse."

The brown faces around him hardened, as Tembesi spoke for all: "We do not wish to die uselessly. But we have discussed this for years, it was a dream of our fathers before us, and we

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know our own will. The People of the Trees will hazard death if they must. If we fail, we shall not wait for the sickness to destroy us, but take our children in our arms and leap from the uppermost boughs. Then the Trees can take us back into their own substance, and we will be leaves in the sunlight."

It wasn't really very cold here, but Flandry shivered.

They had now reached a certain bole. Tembesi stopped. "This we call the Tree Where the Ketjils Nest," he said, "the home of my clan. Welcome, liberator."

Flandry looked up. And up. Plastic rungs had been set into the ancient rough bark. At intervals a platform, ornamented with flowering creepers, offered a breathing spell. But the climb would be long. He sighed and followed his guide.

When he reached the lowest branch, he saw it stretch like a road, outward and curving gradually up. There were no rails. Looking down, he spied earth dizzily far beneath him, and gulped. This close to the leaves, he heard their rustling loud and clear, everywhere around; they made a green gloom, unrestful with a thousand flickering candle-flames of reflection. He saw buildings along the branch, nestled into its forks or perched on swaying ancillary limbs. They were living houses, woven together of parasitic grasses like enormous reeds rooted in the bark—graceful domes and hemicylinders, with wind flapping dyed straw curtains in their doorways. Against the trunk itself stood a long peak-roofed structure of blossoming sod.

"What's that?" asked Flandry.

Djuanda said in an awed whisper, almost lost under the leaf-voices: "The shrine. The gods are there, and a tunnel cut deep into the wood. When a boy is grown, he enters that tunnel for a night. I may not say more."

"The rest are public buildings, storehouses and processing plants and so on," said Tembesi with an obvious desire to turn the conversation elsewhere. "Let us climb further, to where people dwell."

The higher they ascended, the more light and airy it became. There the buildings were smaller, often gaily patterned. They stood in clusters where boughs forked; a few were attached to the main trunk. The dwellers were about, running barefoot along even the thin and quivering outermost parts as if this were solid ground. Only very young children were restricted, by leash or wattle fence. Physically, this tribe was no different from any other on Unan Besar; their costume varied in mere details of batik; even most of the homely household tasks their women carried out, or

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the simple furniture glimpsed through uncurtained doorways, was familiar. Their uniqueness was at once more subtle and more striking. It lay in dignified courtesy, which glanced at the newcomers with frank interest but did not nudge or stare, which softened speech and made way for a neighbor coming down a narrow limb. It lay in the attitude toward leaders like Tembesi, respectful but not subservient; in laughter more frequent and less shrill than elsewhere; in the plunk of a samesan, as a boy sat vine-crowned, swinging his feet over windy nothingness and serenading his girl.

"I see flats of vegetables here and there," Flandry remarked. "Where are the big crops you spoke of, Djuanda?"

"You can see one of our harvesting crews a few more boughs up, Captain."

Flandry groaned.

The sight was picturesque, though. From the outer twigs hung lichenous beards, not unlike Spanish moss. Groups of men went precariously near, using hooks and nets to gather it in. Flandry felt queasy just watching them, but they seemed merry enough at their appalling work. The stuff was carried down by other men to a processing shed, where it would yield the antipyretic drug (Unan Besar had more than one disease!) which was the chief local cash crop.

There were other sources of food, fiber, and income. Entire species of lesser trees and bushes grew on the big ones; mutation and selection had made them useful to man. Semi-domesticated fowl nested where a share of eggs could be taken. Eventually, branches turned sick; pruning them, cutting them up, treating the residues, amounted to an entire lumber and plastics industry. Bark worms and burrowing insects were a good source of protein, Flandry was assured—though admittedly hunting and fishing down on the ground was more popular.

It was obvious why the planet had only this one stand of titans. The species was moribund, succumbing to a hundred parasitic forms which evolved faster than its own defenses. Now man had established a kind of symbiosis, preserving these last few: one of the rare cases where man had actually helped out nature. *And so,* thought Flandry, *even if I'm not much for bucolic surroundings myself, I've that reason also to like the people of Ranau.*

Near the very top, where branches were more sparse and even the bole swayed a little, Tembesi halted. A plank platform supported a reed hut overgrown with purple-blooming

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creepers. "This is for the use of newly wed couples, who need some days' privacy," he said. "But I trust you and your wife will consider it your own, Captain, for as long as you honor our clan with your presence."

"Wife?" Flandry blinked. Luang suppressed a grin. Well . . . solid citizens like these doubtless had equally well-timbered family lives. No reason to disillusion them. "I thank you," he bowed. "Will you not enter with me?"

Tembesi smiled and shook his head. "You are tired and wish to rest, Captain. There are food and drink within for your use. Later we will pester you with formal invitations. Shall we say tonight, an hour after sunset—you will dine at my house? Anyone can guide you there."

"And we'll hear your plans!" cried Djuanda.

Tembesi remained calm; but it flamed in his eyes. "If the Captain so desires."

He bowed. "Good rest, then. Ah—friend Kemul—you are invited to stay with me."

The mugger looked around. "Why not here?" he said belligerently.

"This cabin only has one room."

Kemul stood hunched, legs planted wide apart, arms dangling. He swung his hideous face back and forth, as if watching for an attack. "Luang," he said,

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"why did we ever snag the Terran?"

The girl struck a light to her cigaret. "I thought it would be interesting," she shrugged. "Now do run along."

A moment more Kemul stood, then shuffled to the platform's edge and down the ladder.

Flandry entered the cabin with Luang. It was cheerfully furnished. The floorboards rocked and vibrated; leaves filled it with an ocean noise. 'Cosmos, how I can sleep!" he said.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Luang. She approached an electric brazier next to a pantry. "I could make you some dinner." With a curiously shy smile: "We wives have to learn cooking."

"I suspect I'm a better cook than you are," he laughed, and went to wash up. Running water was available, though at this height it must be pumped from a cistern thirty meters below. There was even a hot tap. Djuanda had mentioned an extensive use of solar cells in this community as its prime energy source. The Terran stripped off his bedraggled finery, scrubbed, flopped on the bed, and tumbled into sleep.

Luang shook him awake hours later. "Get up, we'll be late for supper." He yawned and slipped on a kilt laid out for him. To hell with anything else. She was equally informal, except for a blossom in her hair. They walked out on the platform.

A moment they paused, then, to look. There weren't many more branches above them; they could see through the now faintly shining leaves to a deep blue-black sky and the earliest stars. The Tree foamed with foliage on either hand and below. It was like standing above a lake and hearing the waters move. Once in a while Flandry glimpsed phosphor globes, hung on twigs far underfoot. But such lighting was more visible on the next Tree, whose vast shadowy mass twinkled with a hundred firefly lanterns. Beyond was the night.

Luang slipped close to him. He felt her shoulder as a silken touch along his arm. "Give me a smoke, will you?" she said. "I am out."

"'Fraid I am too."

"Damn!" Her curse was fervent.

"Want one that bad?"

"Yes. I do not like this place."

"Why, I think it's pleasant."

"Too much sky. Not enough people. None of them my kind of people. Gods! Why *did* I ever tell Kemul to intercept you?"

"Sorry now?"

"Oh . . . no . . . I suppose not. In a way. Dominic—" She caught his hand. Her own fingers were cold. He wished he could make out her expression

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in the dusk. "Dominic, have you any plans at all? Any hopes?"

"As a matter of fact," he said, "yes."

"You must be crazy. We can't fight a planet. Not even with this ape-folk to help. I know a city, in the opposite hemisphere —or even old Swamp Town, I can hide you there forever, I swear I can—"

"No," he said. "It's good of you, kid, but I'm going ahead with my project. We won't need you, though, so feel free to take off."

Fear edged her tone, for the first time since he had met her: "I do not want to die of the sickness."

"You won't. I'll get clean away, with no suspicion of the fact—"

"Impossible! Every spaceship on this planet is watched!"

"—or else I'll be recaptured. Or, more likely, killed. I'd prefer being killed, I think. But either way, Luang, you've done your share and there's no reason for you to take further risks. I'll speak to Tembesi. You can get a car out of here tomorrow morning."

"And leave you?"

"Uh—"

"No," she said.

They stood unspeaking a while. The Tree soughed and thrummed.

Finally she asked, "Must you act tomorrow already, Dominic?"

"Soon," he replied. "I dare not give Warouw much time. He's almost as intelligent as I am."

"But tomorrow?" she insisted.

"Well—no. No, I suppose it could wait another day or two. Why?"

"Then wait. Tell Tembesi you have to work out the details of your scheme. But not with him. Let's be alone up here. This wretched planet can spare an extra few hours till it is free—without any idea how to use freedom —can it not?"

"I reckon so."

Flandry dared not be too eager about it, or he might never get up courage for the final hazard. But he couldn't help agreeing with the girl. One more short day and night? Why not? Wasn't a man entitled to a few hours entirely his own, out of the niggardly total granted him?

XIV

AMONG other measures, Nias Warouw had had a confidential alarm sent all dispensers, to watch for a fugitive of such and such a description and listen (with judicious pumping of the clientele) for any rumors about him. Despite a considerable reward offered, the chief was in no hopes of netting his bird with anything so elementary.

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When the personal call arrived for him, he had trouble believing it. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, tuan, quite," answered the young man in the telecom screen. He had identified himself by radio-scanned fingerprints and secret number as well as by name; in the past, hijacker gangs seeking pills for the black market had sometimes used false dispensers. This was absolutely Siak, stationed in Ranau. "He is right in this community. Being as isolated as we are, the average person here knows him only as a visitor from across the sea. So he walks about freely."

"How did he happen to come, do you know?" asked Warouw, elaborately casual.

"Yes, tuan, I have been told. He befriended a youth of our clan in Gunung Utara. The boy released some prisoners of yours; then, with the help of certain local people, they contrived Flandry's escape from Biocontrol Central."

Warouw suppressed a wince at being thus reminded of two successive contretemps. He went on the offensive with a snap: "How do you know all this, dispenser?"

Siak wet his lips before answering nervously, "It seems Flandry hypnotized the boy with gaudy daydreams of seeing Mother Terra. Through the boy, then, Flandry's criminal friends met several other youths of Ranau—restless and reckless—and organized them into a sort of band for the purpose of liberating Flandry and getting him off this planet. Of course, it would be immensely helpful to have me as part of their conspiracy. The first boy, who is a kinsman of mine, sounded me out. I realized something was amiss and responded as he hoped to his hints, in order to draw him out. As soon as I appeared to be of one mind with them, they produced Flandry from the woods and established him in a house here. They claim he is an overseas trader scouting for new markets. . . . Tuan, we must hurry. They have something afoot already. I do not know what. Neither do most of the conspirators. Flandry says that no man can reveal, by accident or treachery, what he has not been told. I only know they do have some means, which they expect to prepare within a very short time. Hurry!"

Warouw controlled a shudder. He had never heard of any interstellar equivalent of radio. But Terra might have her military secrets. Was that Flandry's trump card? He forced himself to speak softly: "I shall."

"But tuan, you must arrive unobserved. Flandry is alert to the chance of being betrayed. With the help of his rebel

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friends, he must have established a dozen boltholes. If something goes wrong, they will blast down the vault, take a large stock of antitoxin, and escape through the wilderness to complete their apparatus elsewhere. In that case, I am supposed to cooperate with them and pretend to you that I was overpowered. But it would make no difference if I resisted, would it, tuan?"

"I suppose not." Warouw stared out a window, unheeding of the bright gardens. "Judging from your account, a few well-armed men could take him. Can you invite him to your house at a given time, where we will be in ambush?"

"I can do better than that, tuan. I can lead your men to his own house, to await his return. He has been working constantly at the Tree of the Gnarly Boughs, which has a little electronic shop. But in his guise as a grader, he has been asked to dine at noon with my uncle Tembesi. So he will come back to his guest house shortly before, to bathe and change clothes."

"Hm. The problem is to get my people in secretly." Warouw considered the planetary map which filled one wall of his office. "Suppose I land a car in the woods this very day, far enough out from your settlement not to be seen. My men and I will march in afoot, reaching your dispensary at night. Can you then smuggle us by byways to his house?"

"I . . . I think so, tuan, if there are only a few of you. Certain paths, directly from limb to limb rather than along the trunk, are poorly lighted and little frequented after dark. The cabin he uses is high up on the Tree Where the Ketjils Nest, isolated from any others. . . . But tuan, if there can merely be three or four men with you . . . it seems dangerous."

"Bah! Not when each man has a blaster. I do not want a pitched battle with your local rebels, though; the more quietly this affair is handled, the better. So I will leave most of my crew with the aircar. When we have Flandry secured, I will call the pilot to come get us. The rest of the conspiracy can await my leisure. I doubt if anyone but the Terran himself represents any real danger."

"Oh, no, tuan!" exclaimed Siak. "I was hoping you would understand that, and spare the boys. They are only hot-headed, there is no real harm in them—"

"We shall see about that, when all the facts become known," said Warouw bleakly. "You may expect reward and promotion, dispenser . . . unless you bungle something so he escapes again, in which case there will be no sparing of you."

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Siak gulped. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

"I wish to all the gods there were time to think out a decent plan," said Warouw. He smiled in wryness. "But as it is, I have not even time to complain about the shortness of time." Leaning forward, like a cat at a mouse-hole: "Now, there are certain details I must know, the layout of your community and—"

XV

AS THEY neared the heights, the sun—low above gleaming crowns—struck through an opening in those leaves which surrounded her and turned Luang's body to molten gold. Flandry stopped.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Just admiring, my sweet." He drew a lungful of dawn air and savored the sad trilling of a ketjil. *There may not be another chance.*

"Enough," grumbled Kemul. "On your way, Terran."

"Be still!" The girl stamped her foot.

Kemul dropped a hand to his blaster and glared out of red eyes. "You have had plenty of time with her, Terran," he said. "Any more stalling now, and Kemul will know for a fact you are afraid."

"Oh, I am," said Flandry, lightly but quite honestly. His pulse hammered; he saw the great branch, the leaves that flickered around it, the score of men who stood close by, with an unnatural sharpness. "Scared spitless."

Luang snarled at the mugger: "You do not have to go up there and face blaster fire!"

Seeing the ugly face, as if she had struck it and broken something within, Flandry knew a moment's pain for Kemul. He said in haste: "That's my own orders, darling. I thought you knew. Since you insisted on waiting this close to the scene of action, I told him to stand by and protect you in case things got nasty. I won't hear otherwise, either."

She bridled. "Look here, I have always taken care of myself and—"

He stopped her words with a kiss. After a moment's rigidity, she melted against him.

Letting her go, he swung on his heel, grabbed a rung, and went up the bole as fast as he could. Her eyes pursued him until the leaves curtained her off. Then he climbed alone, among murmurous mysterious grottos. Not quite alone, he told his fears. Tembesi, Siak, young Djuanda, and their comrades came behind. They were lifetime hunters, today on a tiger hunt. But their number and their archaic chemical rifles were of

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small account against ion flames.

Well, a man could only die once.

Unfortunately.

The taste of Luang lingered on his mouth. Flandry mounted a final ladder to the platform, which swayed in morning wind. Before him was the cabin. It looked like one arbor of purple flowers. He stepped to the doorway, twitched the drape aside, and entered.

Because the truncheons whacking from either side were not unexpected, he dodged them. His movement threw him to the floor. He rolled over, sat up, and looked into the nozzles of energy guns.

"Be still," hissed Warouw, "or I will boil your eyes with a low beam."

A disgruntled club wielder peered out a vine-screened window. "Nobody else," he said.

"You!" Another Guard kicked Flandry in the ribs. "Was there not a woman with you?"

"No—no—" The Terran picked himself up, very carefully, keeping hands folded atop his head. His gray eyes darted around the hut. Siak had given him a report on the situation, after leaving Warouw here to wait, but Flandry required precise detail.

Two surly Guards posted at the door, sticks still in hand and blasters holstered. Two more, one in each corner, out of jump range, their own guns drawn and converging on him. Waróuw close to the center of the room, and to Flandry: a small, deft, compact man with a smile flickering on his lips, wearing only the green kilt and medallion, a blaster in his clutch. The brand of Biocontrol smoldered on his brow like yellow fire.

It was now necessary to hold all their attention for a few seconds. Tembesi's men could climb over the supporting branches rather than up the ladder, and so attain this platform unobserved from the front of the cabin. But it had a rear window too.

"No," said Flandry, "there isn't anyone with me. Not just now. I left her at—Never mind. How in the name of all devils and tax collectors did you locate me so fast? Who tipped you?"

"I think I shall ask the questions," said Warouw. His free hand reached into a pocket and drew forth the flat case of a short-range radiocom. "The girl does not matter, though. If she arrives in the next several minutes, before the car does, we can pick her up too. Otherwise she can wait. Which will not be for long, Captain. A carful of well-armed men is out in the jungle. When they arrive, I will leave them in charge of the local airstrip—and dispensary, in case your noble young morons retain any ideas

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about raiding it. Then she can give herself up, or wait for a search party to flush her out of hiding, or run into the jungle and die. That last would be a cruel waste of so much beauty, but I do not care immensely."

He was about to thumb the radiocom switch and put the instrument to his lips. Flandry said with great clearness and expression—rather proud of rendering it so well in Pulaoic—"Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill: Halloo, halloo, loo loo!"

"What?" Warouw exclaimed.

"Take heed o' the foul fiend," cried Flandry: "obey thy parents; keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array. Tom's a-cold."

He twirled once around, laughing, and saw that he had all their eyes. A Guard made signs against evil. Another whispered, "He is going amok, tuan!"

The Terran flapped his arms. "This is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet," he crowed: "he begins at curfew, and walks till the first cock; he gives the web and the pin, squints the eye, and makes the hare-lip; mildews the white wheat, and hurts the poor creature of earth." He burst into song:

"Swithold footed thrice the old;
He met the nightmare and her nine-fold—"

"Be still!" Warouw stuck the radiocom back in his pocket, advanced, and thrust expert fingers at Flandry's solar plexus.

Flandry didn't remain in the path of that blow. He tumbled on his back, just in front of the chief. His feet came up, hard, into the groin. As Warouw lurched forward on top of him, driven by the kick as much as the pain, Flandry got the man's gun wrist between two arms and broke the blaster loose. No chance to use it—the effort sent it across the floor, out of reach.

He clutched Warouw against him, shouted, and wondered icily if the Guards would incinerate their own boss to get him.

The four sprang toward the grappling pair.

A rifle cracked at the rear window. A Guard fell backward, brains splashed from his skull. Tembesi fired again. One of the other Guards managed to shoot. Flame engulged Tembesi. The whole real wall went up in smoke and thunder. But even as the ecologist died, the room was exposed to outside view. Guns barked from a dozen surrounding boughs.

Flandry saw the last Guard crash to the boards. Fire sheeted up in the flimsy roof. He relaxed his hold on Warouw, preparatory to hustling the man out of the burning hut.

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Warouw yanked his left arm free. His fist struck the angle of Flandry's jaw.

For a moment, the Terran sagged among whirling ringing darknesses. Warouw scrambled clear of him, snatched up his blaster, and bounded to the doorway.

As he emerged, a voice from the leaves cried, "Halt where you are!" Warouw showed his teeth and fired full power into that foliage. The Tree man screamed once, and fell dead off his branch.

Warouw yanked the radiocom from his pocket. A gun spoke. The instrument shattered in his hand. He looked at his bleeding palm, wiped it, fired a thunderbolt in return, and sped for the ladder. Bullets smote the planks near his feet. The hunters hoped for a disabling shot. But they dared not risk killing him. The whole object had been to lure him here and take him alive.

As he reeled from the cabin, Flandry saw Warouw go over the platform edge. The Terran hefted the blaster he himself had picked up, drew a long breath, and forced clarity back into his head. *Someone has to get him,* he thought in an odd unemotional fashion, *and as I'm the only one on my side who knows much about the care and feeding of spitguns, I seem elected.*

He swarmed down the ladder. "Back!" he called, as supple bodies slipped along the branches on either side of him. "Follow me at a distance. Kill him if he kills me, but hold your fire otherwise."

He set his weapon to full-power needle beam, gaining extreme range at the cost of narrowing his radius of destruction to a centimeter or so. If Warouw wasn't quite as handy with pencil shots, there might be a chance to cripple him without suffering much harm from his own diffuse fire. Or there might not.

Down the holy Tree!

Flandry burst into view of the bough where Luang waited. Warouw confronted her and Kemul. Their hands were in the air; he had taken them by surprise. Warouw backed toward the next set of rungs. "Just keep your places and do not follow me," he panted.

Flandry broke through the leaf cover overhead. Warouw saw him, whipped around and raised gun.

"Get him, Kemul!" shouted Luang.

The giant shoved her behind him and pounced. Warouw glimpsed the motion, turned back, saw the mugger's gun not quite out of its holster, and fired. Red flame enveloped Kemul. He roared, once, and fell burning from the limb.

Having thus been given an ex-

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tra few seconds, Flandry leaped off the bole rungs onto the bough. Warouw's muzzle whirled back to meet him. Flandry's blazed first. Warouw shrieked, lost his gun, and gaped at the hole drilled through his hand.

Flandry whistled. The riflemen of Ranau came and seized Nias Warouw.

XVI

DUSK once more. Flandry emerged from the house of Tembesi. Weariness lay heavy upon him.

Phosphor globes were kindling up and down the Tree Where the Ketjils Nest, and its sister Trees. Through the cool blue air, he could hear mothers call their children home. Men hailed each other, from branch to branch, until the voices of men and leaves and wind became one. The first stars quivered mistily in the east.

Flandry wanted silence for a while. He walked the length of the bough, and of lesser ones forking from it, until he stood on a narrow bifurcation. Leaves still closed his view on either hand, but he could look straight down to the ground, where night rose like a tide, and straight up to the stars.

He stood a time, not thinking of much. When a light footfall shivered the limb beneath him, it was something long expected.

"Hullo, Luang," he said tonelessly.

She came to stand beside him, another slim shadow. "Well," she said, "Kemul is buried now."

"I wish I could have helped you," said Flandry, "but—"

She sighed. "It was better this way. He always swore he would be content to end in a Swamp Town canal. If he must lie under a blossoming bush, I do not think he would want anyone but me there to wish him good rest."

"I wonder why he came to my help."

"I told him to."

"And why did you do that?"

"I don't know. We all do things without thinking, now and then. The thinking comes afterward. I will *not* let it hurt me." She took his arm. Her hands were tense and unsteady. "Never mind Kemul. Since you have stopped working on him, I take it you have succeeded with Warouw?"

"Yes," said Flandry.

"How did you do it? Torture?" she asked casually.

"Oh, no," he said. "I didn't even withhold medical care for his injuries: which are minor, anyhow. I simply explained that we had a cage for him if he didn't cooperate. It took a few hours' argument to convince him we meant it. Then he yielded. After all, he's an able man. He can leave this planet—he'd better!—

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and start again elsewhere, and do rather well, I should think."

"Do you mean to let him go?" she protested.

Flandry shrugged. "I had to make the choice as clear-cut as possible—between dying of the sickness, and starting afresh with a substantial cash stake. Though I wonder if the adventurous aspect of it didn't appeal to him most, once I'd dangled a few exotic worlds before his imagination."

"What of that carful of men out in the forest?"

"Warouw's just called them on the dispenser's radiocom, to come and get me. They're to land on the airstrip—change of plan, he said. Djaunda, Siak, and some others are waiting there, with blasters in their hands and revenge in their hearts. It won't be any problem."

"And then what is to happen?"

"Tomorrow Warouw will call Biocontrol. He'll explain that he has me secure, and that some of my co-conspirators spilled enough of what I'd told them for him to understand the situation pretty well. He and some Guards will take me in my own flitter to Spica, accompanied by another ship. En route he'll hypnoprobe me and get the full details. Tentatively, his idea will be to sabotage the flitter, transfer to the other craft, and let mine crash with me aboard. Somewhat later, he and the Guards will land. They'll tell the Imperial officials a carefully doctored story of my visit, say they're returning what they believe was a courtesy call, and be duly shocked to learn of my 'accidental' death. In the course of all this, they'll drop enough false information to convince everyone that Unan Besar is a dreary place with no trade possibilities worth mentioning."

"I see," nodded the girl. "You only sketched the idea to me before. Of course, the 'Guards' will be Ranau men, in uniforms lifted from the car crew; and they will actually be watching Warouw every second, rather than you. But do you really think it can be done without rousing suspicion?"

"I know damn well it can," said Flandry, "because Warouw has been promised the cage if Biocontrol does sabotage the Central prematurely. He'll cooperate! Also, remember what slobs the Guard Corps are. A half-witted horse could cheat them at pinochle. Bandang and the other governors shouldn't be hard to diddle either, with their own trusted Nias Warouw assuring them everything is lovely."

"When will you come back?" she asked.

"I don't know. Not for a good many days. We'll take along enough scientific material for the antitoxin to be synthesized, of

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course . . . and enough other stuff to convince the Imperial entrepreneurs that Unan Besar is worth their attention. A large supply of pills will have to be made ready, ships and ships full. Because naturally Biocontrol Central will be destroyed when they arrive, by some idiot like Genseng. But the merchant fleet will know where all the dispensaries are, and be ready to supply each one instantly. It will all take a while to prepare, though."

Flandry sought yellow Spica in the sky, which was now quickening with stars. Here they called Spica the Golden Lotus, doubtless very poetic and so on. But he felt his own depression and tiredness slide away as he thought of its colony planet, bright lights, smooth powerful machines, sky-high towers—his kind of world! And afterward there would be Home. . . .

Luang sensed it in him. She gripped his arm and said almost in terror: "You will come back, will you not? You will not just leave everything to those merchants?"

"What?" He came startled out of his reverie. "Oh. I see. Well, honestly, darling, you've nothing to be afraid of. The transition may be a little violent here and there. But you're welcome to remain at Ranau, where things will stay peaceful, until you feel like a triumphal return to Kompong Timur. Or like getting passage to the Imperial planets—"

"I don't care about that!" she cried. "I want your oath you will return with the fleet."

"Well—" He capitulated. "All right. I'll come back for a while."

"And afterward?"

"Look here," he said, alarmed, "I'm as mossless a stone as you'll find in a universe of rolling. I mean, well, if I tried to stay put anywhere, I'd be eating my fingernails in thirty days and eating the carpet in half a year. And, uh, my work isn't such that any, well, any untrained person could—"

"Oh, never mind." She let his arm go. Her voice was flat among the leaves. "It doesn't matter. You need not return at all, Dominic."

"I said I'd do that much," he protested rather feebly.

"It doesn't matter," she repeated. "I never asked for more than a man could give."

She left him. He stared after her. It was hard to tell in the dimness, but he thought she bore her head high. Almost, he followed, but as she vanished among leaves and shadows he decided it was best not to. He stood for a time under the stars, breathing the night wind. Then faintly across ten kilometers, he heard the crash and saw the flare of guns.

THE END

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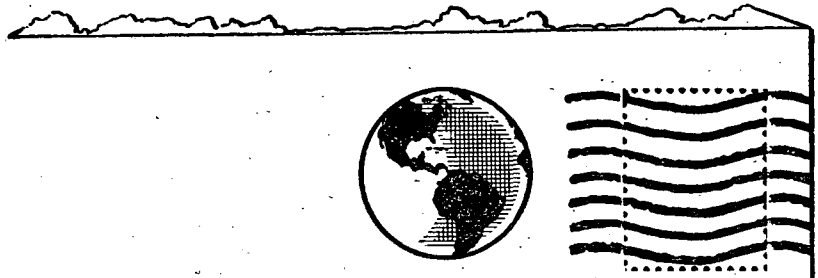

According to you...

Dear Editor:

Strange about the October issue of *Fantastic.* I thought that kind of thing had gone out years ago; both the cover and the lead story could have been from a 1949 issue of your magazine, when it printed that sort of exciting but thoughtless boy battles demons, gets girl. This had it even down to the garish yet brilliant cover, dwarf who dies in the end, and you can't kill me, I'm your father, semi-surprise ending. And even with some of the old power and sense of wonder, too, though not as much so as the "Hunters" series. I almost liked it very much in places. The night of the hurricane when he went berserk was very well done, and the starfish were interesting. Still I hope you will use this sort of story only as a change of pace and not as a regular thing. It may get readers by giving them the escape they looked for and didn't find right after Sputnik but it won't keep them for long.

Since you printed a throwback like this, which is like the old *Fantastic Adventures,* I have a good excuse to ask a question I have had in mind for quite a while. Is the present *Fantastic-Stories of Imagination* the same magazine as *FA* or was there a gap or overlap of issues somewhere back among the many name changes? [*Ed. Note: Same magazine.*]

I saw the Planetarium's wonder show that you mentioned in your editorial and disagree with the one "wonder" that you singled out for your special designation "no argument". When I was there I asked the speaker why the moon had been chosen and he gave me no reason other than that it is going around the earth. There are reasons for the moon being one of the seven wonders such

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as its disproportionate size and its craters but these were not the reasons he gave. In fact, though I can't remember exact instances now, at the time I felt the whole thing was a bit farfetched and [if you'll pardon the phrase] nebulous. Every other thing mentioned looked like a cloud. From a purely wonder point of view I'd pick Venus for mystery, the "canals" of Mars, the "Red Spot" of Jupiter, and the atmospheric displays of earth [which is as much a part of the universe as anything else]. And I'll bet other readers have even better ideas. The astronomers may be experts on facts but you know who are the experts on wonder. By the way, I picked the rings of Saturn as the wonder no one would vote against and I would like to know who did and why.

Frederick Norwood
Box 401
3 Ames Street
Cambridge 39, Mass.

● *The only votes against the rings of Saturn came from the advertising agency account executive in charge of the Ballantine beer (three rings) account. He felt Saturn was infringing his client's trademark.*

Dear Editor:

When BEYOND was in publication back in the early fifties, I bought it regularly. In the sixth issue they had a splendid novel by James Gunn, *The Sine of the Magus.* I still consider that his best effort to date, but *Donor* takes a close second with no other piece in contention. I only hope that James Gunn begins producing more often and that his pen continues its fruitful outbursts.

Christopher Greco
Birmingham, Michigan

Dear Editor:

Fantastic for October is very good, with a fast-paced, rousing, polished action story to lead things off. "The Seats Of Hell" was by far the best story in this issue; but when Mr. Dickson sets out to write a novelet, he usually does so well that the other authors appearing in the same issue as he have to bat a near .500 to even compete.

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I like your new sub-title: Stories of Imagination. Thank heavens, you didn't add something like Stories of *Fact* and Imagination!

Bobby Gene Warner
5316 Old Cheney Highway
Orlando, Florida

● *Now why didn't* we *think of that?*

COMING NEXT MONTH

Next month could well be called "old favorite" month for FANTASTIC. At least three of its best-liked authors will be represented on the contents page.

Keith Laumer headlines the February FANTASTIC with the first instalment of a three-part serial, *Worlds of the Imperium*. In slashing prose, Laumer writes of a man who is caught up physically and emotionally not only in an alternate-track universe, but in the loves and hates of its people.

Jack Sharkey returns with one of his typical yarns—and we use the word "yarn" advisedly, as you will see when you read (through tears of laughter) *A thread in Time*.

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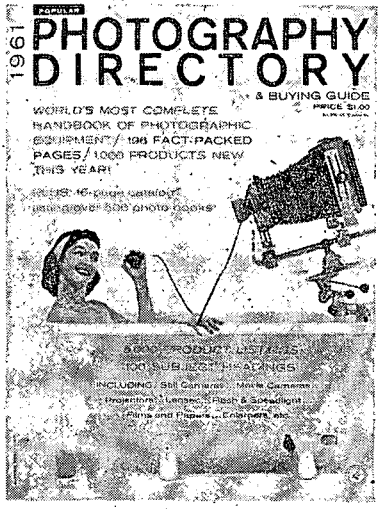
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